Draco Black and the Bastard Dragon

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Draco Black and the Bastard Dragon

by starbrigid

Summary

Draco has seen and done terrible things to protect those he cares about, Harry Potter most of all. He has made a vow for the sake of his beloved godfather that will test him to the very core. But even he is unprepared for the challenges the war will provide him and those he loves, as he must finally confront the one he fears the most in the world: Bellatrix Lestrange.

On a quest to find the final Horcruxes and destroy them, Draco's path will go awry, and take him on a journey back to where everything began. To the truth of his past. To the legacy of the Daughters' Mirrors and their joining. To the Mirror of Ecidyrue.

Notes

Hi, everyone! -waves- This is the final installment! Please don't expect any kind of regular update schedule, it will kind of happen when it happens, I hope you all can understand :) sorry...

I hope everyone will enjoy this book! Like earlier books, it will use significant passages from the original books. Also, standard warnings for unreliable narration, moral grayness, trauma and depression, and serious graphic violence and gore, sex acts, BDSM, major character death, and Bellatrix Lestrange.

(Underage tag is for characters who are seventeen, since that's underage in the US where I'm from.)

Anyway, please have fun! I love all my readers so much <3

The Will of Albus Dumbledore

Chapter Notes

There is a playlist that updates for each chapter here.

The Grangers welcomed Hermione and her best friend home for summer break with open arms. They seemed less sure what to think of their unexpected companion, but they were just as warm and welcoming to Gilderoy Lockhart.

"My, what a lovely home," Gilderoy was saying, before alighting upon what Draco too had initially found the place's chief attraction. "And Draco told me about this. It's a sort of- er- shrine to Hermione. How charming." He regarded the display full of pictures of Hermione at various ages with the understanding of a man who had once surrounded himself with pictures of himself.

Hermione groaned while her parents tittered. "For the last time," she complained, "It's not a shrine!"

"You like to tease our girl, don't you," Mr. Granger said amusedly. "It's wonderful to have you here, Draco. I take it you'll be in London for the summer too, with your uncles. Hopefully we can see some of you this summer."

"Of course," Draco lied brightly.

"And this is..." They finally turned with understandable confusion towards the rather outlandishly dressed grown man their daughter had brought home with her.

"Gilderoy Lockhart," Gilderoy said brightly, shaking both of their hands vigorously, before remembering his cover story. "That is, *Professor* Gilderoy Lockhart. I'm a professor at Hogwarts. These two are some of my brightest pupils in, ah, Defense Against the Dark Arts. Just paying a house call, what? Making sure the, er, dark arts are adequately defended against in this domicile."

"Oh, is that a danger?" Mrs. Granger asked, sounding unconcerned.

"Constant vigilance," Draco offered helpfully.

The Grangers did not look as though they thought this long-haired customer in head-to-toe blue fur could defend against a dark hamster, but they were naturally kind enough not to say so. It might have been easier, what they were about to do, if the Grangers were not always so universally kind.

Gilderoy produced his wand, and made a show of waving it about in the air, presumably in the process of detecting dark magic. It was a reminder of the old Gilderoy who had been a Hogwarts professor, always shamming. But the sight of Gilderoy so much as getting out his wand seemed to set a chill through Hermione, who shrank back against Draco's side.

"We don't have to do this, you know," Draco whispered to her, words kept low by his face in her bushy hair. "We can still turn back. There have to be other ways to keep them safe, we just haven't thought of them..."

Hermione seemed tempted by his words for a moment, but then she squared her shoulders and straightened up. "No," she whispered back. "No, this is what we have to do."

"If you like, you can stay for dinner after, Professor... Lockhart," Mrs. Granger filled in after a bright-eyed Gilderoy provided the name. "We have a roast in the oven. Lamb, if you like it. We'd love to hear more about your job at Hogwarts. And I hope Draco will stay as well. You will, won't you, dear?"

"Plenty to talk about with the footy," Mr. Granger said excitedly. "It's been too long. Would love to pick your brain about the season we had with the Gunners."

"Of course," Draco said obligingly, and turned again to Hermione. She had scarcely moved a muscle since she first came in. "Shall we stay for dinner first?" he whispered. "There's no harm in that, if you like..." Hermione's face convulsed in barely concealed pain. "Or if you'd rather just get it over with, like ripping off a band-aid, we can do that too..."

"What are you two whispering about?" Mr. Granger asked fondly, without a hint of suspicion on his intelligent, honest face.

"Teenager things," Draco said lamely, and watched Hermione for any sign of what she'd prefer. For him, dragging it out seemed to make it worse, make it feel more of a betrayal. But Gilderoy, for one, was natural enough in the role now that he'd gotten into it, chattering with Mrs. Granger about the origin of his Ravenclaw-blue furs. Draco supposed Gilderoy was the only one here with experience in this sort of thing.

"Let's..." Hermione shuddered. "Please, let's just get it over with."

"Gilderoy?" Draco called, and Gilderoy came back over to them, with a tension in the air that even Mr. and Mrs. Granger seemed to feel, glancing confusedly at each other. "Gilderoy, it's time."

"Oh, alright," Gilderoy said with a sigh, seeming of all things to have been enjoying himself, before turning on the two Muggles before him with an apologetic smile. "Mr. and Mrs. Granger, thank you for your lovely hospitality. I regret to make one last imposition upon you." Mrs. Granger smiled quizzically as Gilderoy drew his wand again, but that was the extent of their resistance. "Obliviate!"

His hand drew the altered circle through the air with the ease of a master craftsman at his work. Both Mr. and Mrs. Granger were subject to its effortless glow, which threw them

slightly backwards where they stood. Hermione let out a guilty cry and buried her face in Draco's shoulder. Draco took her by the hand and led her out of that forsaken house.

Hermione began to cry while they waited for Gilderoy to emerge, harsh heaving sobs that wracked her body. "He'll do a good job," Draco tried to reassure her, small comfort that must be. "He won't hurt them."

"What have I done," Hermione gasped, and Draco tentatively stroked at her thick hair. "What have I done..."

"Well!" Gilderoy exclaimed brightly as he left the Granger house, smile undented. "There we are. Rather more complex than my usual work, in truth, but no fear. They answered perfectly well to Mr. and Mrs. Wilkins. Wendell and Monica Wilkins. And I do believe their life's ambition is to move to Australia. They were quite enthusiastic on that front before I managed to make my exit. I-"

Gilderoy stopped his stream of patter at the sight of the state of Hermione. "Oh," he said nervously, never at his best in such situations. "Don't worry, Miss Granger, it should all be perfectly reversible."

"When the time comes," Draco said firmly. "When we've won this war."

"When we've won this war," Hermione repeated bleakly, pulling back from Draco and rubbing her eyes. She turned on Gilderoy with uncomfortable intensity. "And the Wilkins don't believe they have a daughter?"

"No," Gilderoy said quickly. "No, that's all gone, although there is the photographs... I would have altered them myself, but I'm used to working with wizarding photographs, so, er..."

"I'll do them," Hermione said resolutely, and made her way back inside her childhood home. They steered clear of the Wilkins as they made their way around the rooms, where Hermione skillfully removed herself from every photo. Some phantom wisp of hurt flashed over her face each time, but she was quick and otherwise unflinching, doing her job well.

They finally ended up at what Draco had always called the Hermione shrine, while in the distance, the Wilkinses pattered happily about the virtues of Australia over their lamb. Hermione was not slow to raise her wand and make her face vanish from every frame, one by one. Gilderoy finally seemed to feel the emotion of the moment, taking on a gloomy air as he watched her efface herself from her own history. "Oh my," Gilderoy said sadly. "I admire your fortitude, Miss Granger, I truly do."

"Thank you, Gilderoy," Hermione said, clearly meant as a dismissal, and Gilderoy backed off to give them space. She turned and whispered to Draco, "If we survive the hunt for the Horcruxes, we'll take Gilderoy and find Mum and Dad and make him lift the enchantment. And if I don't- well, it sounds like he's cast a good enough charm to keep them safe and happy. They won't miss their daughter." Grief threatened to creep into her voice by the end, but she had stopped crying.

She began to cry again once they returned to Xaphan, arriving by Apparition to the library tower where Gilderoy made his departure. Unfortunately, they had waiting for them a none-too-happy Severus Snape, who regarded them all balefully, but especially Gilderoy. "Where did you spirit yourself off to?" Severus said bitterly. "I have been waiting to consult with you on a matter of dungeon restoration for some time-" He broke off when he noticed Hermione's tears. "And what is the matter with *her*?"

"I, er, I can't tell you," Gilderoy said nervously, then flung his arms wide. "But I'm here now! Hello, Severus!"

"More secrets?" Severus said silkily. "You seemed to have retained a rare affinity for those, Gilderoy..."

"Well, welcome to Xaphan," Draco said with a sweeping gesture as he led Hermione away from the quarreling men, helping her carry her luggage as he did. It was, as usual, full enough with books to need several Featherlight charms to make that workable. "You'll find that's not an unusual sight," he said, gesturing back towards Severus and Gilderoy bickering. Personal tension, Draco thought in truth, but now was hardly the time to espouse upon his godfather's private life. Not that Severus particularly had one. "Let's get you settled in to Gryffindor."

"I want to go back to the library here, though," Hermione sniffled. "As soon as possible. I need to *research*..."

Everyone dealt with devastation in their own way, and it was better than it could have been, Hermione wanting to drown her grief in the dusty tomes of Xaphan. Draco didn't know how much she'd find on the Horcruxes in those. He didn't think Dantanian Black or Noir had held any involvement in Horcruxes. But far be it from him to stop her. He regarded her with an ache in his own chest for her suffering, and led her more quickly towards her new home.

At least Draco was no longer banned from this Gryffindor Tower.

Harry and Ron awaited them in the new empty common room. Hermione flung herself on her boyfriend, who led her away to comfort her in more privacy, upon which Draco saw fit to fling himself on his own boyfriend. "Lockhart doesn't know why?" was the first thing Harry asked him, tense with the need for secrecy.

"No," Draco sighed, grounding himself in Harry's Amortentia scent, in the solidness of those beloved arms. "Protection from the war made sense enough. Don't worry, no one knows about the Horcruxes apart from the four of us. No one else even knows we're leaving after Bill and Fleur's wedding."

Luna was living at Xaphan now, along with her father, the Weasleys, and the Sirius-Remus clan. It was no small accomplishment to have kept it from her. Draco resisted the usual impulse to suggest they tell her, but he knew that was a slippery slope, with her inevitable need to tell Neville and perhaps Ginny. Besides, it was a burden and a half to lay on Luna's younger shoulders, the very heart of the fight against Voldemort.

"Good," Harry exhaled. "Do you think Hermione's gonna be okay?"

"Yeah, she's tough," Draco said with full confidence, and tried to snuggle into Harry's lap more securely. Harry's mind seemed set, though, on more vital proceedings.

"Do you think we should leave sooner?" Harry asked anxiously. "There's so much at stake, and the sooner we begin the hunt, the sooner we might-"

"There's research to do," Draco reminded Harry gently, turning that agitated face towards his for a gentle kiss. "A lot of research, while we're still at Xaphan. This is the place to do it, without any chance at Hogwarts." The mention of the surrendered school put a discontented look on Harry's handsome face, just as any mention of the late Dumbledore did. "We're no closer to figuring out who RAB might be, for one. We need to search, but there's no point in searching blind..."

"I know, I know," Harry sighed, giving Draco a long kiss that made his mind turn away from Horcruxes for that moment entirely. "I just... I had a dream last night."

"A dream?" Draco said, pulling back more warily.

"I don't remember it very well," Harry said guardedly. "I don't know what to make of it. You're the first person I've told. I thought you deserved to hear it first, especially because... I know he turned against you in the end, but you were so close for so long..."

Draco's blood ran cold. "Harry, what are you talking about?"

"I dreamed of Voldemort," Harry sighed. "I think it was one of those dreams where I... saw inside his head. It wasn't much of a dream. It was just anger. So much anger. My scar hurt for a while after the dream." His hand went to touch it at the memory, and Draco suddenly found Harry's lap to be a very uncomfortable place to be sitting. "He was angry about Theodore Nott."

"Theo?" Draco breathed, a roaring in his ears he could hardly stifle. "What about Theo?"

"I think he just found out, or found out for sure," Harry said carefully, "That Theo is dead. Draco, I'm so sorry."

Draco forced a smile he feared must look ghastly on his face. "Don't be sorry. Whatever he used to be to me, he was my enemy now. If he's really dead, then that..." He had to force out each word individually. "That's good, isn't it? It makes me and everyone I care about safer."

"Draco," Harry said tenderly. "It's alright to be upset. I won't be jealous. Not now."

Draco's mind was racing, thinking he should be feigning more shock while finding himself unable to do so. "Do you know how he knew Theo was dead? Did they... did they find a body?" He'd used the Liquid Fiendfyre, after all...

"I don't know," Harry sighed, seeming to think Draco was grasping at straws to find it untrue. "But Draco, he seemed pretty sure. I really am sorry, dragon."

"No," Draco said, looking away from Harry. "It's a casualty of war, isn't it? And there's going to be a whole lot more people put in the ground before all this is through."

"I hope not," Harry sighed, and renewed his grip around Draco's waist. Draco tried not to shy away from his touch, with the cold infusing him of the memory of what he'd done. He wished he could have had Gilderoy remove *that* memory from his own head.

How very blissful it would be, not to know what he had done to Theodore Nott.

He had to face it in just the space of hours, though, when Harry saw fit to deliver the news of Theo's death like Voldemort's bloody news bulletin to the other students. They were all gathered in the Gryffindor common room, Harry and Draco sharing an armchair with Ron and Hermione each occupying their own. Luna and Ginny sprawled over the rug gossiping good-spiritedly about their respective significant others. Then Harry turned it all different by clearing his throat and delivering the news.

Hermione gasped, hands flying to her mouth with such violent shock, Ron reached over and gripped her arm comfortingly. Ron's face was a complicated mix of stricken and relieved, and Ginny's hardened, like she was determined to take anything that came with the war with toughness and grit. A second later, though, her face crumbled at the thought of another's grief. "Millie," Ginny breathed, "Oh, no, Millie is going to be heartbroken."

Draco felt his breath constrict and his place perched on Harry's chair rendered somehow precarious, the memory of swearing to Millie about Theo in the halls of Hogwarts surging up. The others might believe it- the Gryffindors- but would Millie ever believe Draco had nothing to do with it? Unless it somehow got spun maybe that Voldemort's anger was at Theo, rage enough to lash out and slaughter his young follower...

As for Luna, she was the picture of nondescript, shrinking away from Ginny's side and general view, her face studiedly blank. She clearly wanted to draw as little attention to herself as possible, and Draco's wracking guilt went that much worse at the reminder of the deception he had involved his cousin in. He reflexively palmed at the dagger in his pocket.

"Millie can deal with it," Ron said finally after a pause, with his characteristic tact. "Theodore Nott brought Death Eaters to Nurmengard to trap us. If you ask me, it serves him right-"

"Don't say that!" Hermione exclaimed. "It's not just Millie. Think how Draco must be feeling!" Even in her grief over what she'd had Gilderoy do to her parents, she still had the heart to think of Draco, who was so unworthy of it.

"He tried to have Draco killed, too," Ginny said, tilting her head. "I don't know if Draco's still holding onto any of the friendship there used to be there."

"He still used to be his friend," Hermione said firmly, "And we need to respect that." She got up, shaking off Ron's hand, and went over to give Draco a one-armed hug. "Grief doesn't have to be rational. And it needs to be felt. Whatever you're feeling, Draco, we're all here for you, I promise."

It was the moment, if there had ever been a moment. The time to come clean before all of them and let them know what he'd done. Maybe his guilt put the thought in his head, or maybe it was the sheer pressure of the secret held along with the conviction of his own impending death, but its weight seemed suddenly too much to bear. Draco could nearly feel the words on his tongue like a burden to be shaken off his overburdened shoulders, his and Luna's, the confession right there ready to come out and yet somehow as impossible as the Langlocked confession of his time travel.

Because what did he expect? Handshakes and congratulations? It was a terrible thing he'd done, even though a thing to keep the people before him safe. But he could hardly expect them to see him as anything but monstrous after doing that to someone who had, after all, just as Hermione said, used to be his friend.

Draco stayed silent, though he felt the breath on his neck of the secret, lingering there right at his back, stretching its dark poison tendrils towards reality, willing itself to be known. He could hope, he told himself, that he would die before the truth ever need be known. And that was a bargain he thought fair enough, since however grave his sins were, he did intend to die for them.

It was hard to dwell on the risk of discovery, with the amount of work Mrs. Weasley laid upon them in preparation for the wedding. The rest of the Order was in and out all the time, abuzz with business, but the students there were drafted as free labor for the festivities. Time went by quicker with the amount of work foisted upon them, advancing towards the date they had set for their departure. Hermione barely had time to spend with her books. She was still working hard, though, on which books to bring in her seemingly infinite bag space, and which to leave behind.

The new Gryffindor Tower at Xaphan had not yet been enchanted to prevent boys from going into the girls' dorms, so the three of them could go join Hermione there without sirens. Even on Harry's birthday, their bookworm was hard at work. They found her with two massive stacks of books atop her bed. One stack, presumably the no stack, was topped with *Numerology and Grammatica*, while the other had *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts* at the top.

She had taken hold of all of their remaining books that hadn't been lost along with Hogwarts, along with a combination of the textbooks already bought in mass for Xaphan, books from Xaphan's library, and books she'd sent for herself. It was in truth the most concrete thing holding them back from starting off after the Horcruxes right away: Hermione's need for them to be supplied with sufficient books for the journey. Draco wished he knew from the blue loop just how vital, say, *The Monster Book of Monsters* was to Harry Potter's eventual victory.

"Hey, 'Mione," said Ron, and leaned in for a kiss. Hermione gave him a distracted one before returning to her piles.

"I brought you something," Draco offered, and offered his own contribution to the piles, his only book rescued from Hogwarts: *Moste Dark Blood Rituals of the Demon Goddess Hecate*.

He had taken the liberty of removing the marker for Cadaunuptium. Hermione added it to the yes pile with a grim look but no questioning.

"Are we really going to need all these books, anyway?" Ron marveled, and Hermione leveled a stern look at him.

"Ronald," she said primly, "I'm going to pretend you didn't say that."

"Of course," said Ron. "I forgot we'll be hunting down Voldemort in a mobile library."

Hermione gave Draco an incredulous look as he sniggered along with Ron. "You're the one who's been bringing me more!" she said accusingly, and Draco shrugged. Hermione's attention went back down to *Spellman's Syllabary.* "I wonder ... will we need to translate runes? It's possible... I think we'd better take it, to be safe." She put *Hogwarts: A History* in the yes pile with it, threatening a collapse of the pile's structural integrity. Harry shook his head fondly with a radiant smile. Draco gave him a quick kiss before returning his gaze to the matter at hand.

The days were dropping away, after all, before their departure was imminent. "We still have no idea," Draco said cautiously, "Where we're going with all these supplies once we leave."

"Godric's Hollow?" Harry offered tentatively.

"Don't you think there's a possibility that Voldemort's keeping a watch on Godric's Hollow?" Hermione interjected. "He might expect you to go back and visit your parents' graves, won't he?"

"We don't have any better leads about where the Horcruxes may be," Draco sighed gloomily, regarding their entire enterprise as what it was: a shot in the dark. If only he'd spent this time in the blue loop on their side. "If Harry has a feeling about that place, then maybe..."

Ron raised a hand to interrupt. "Hey, this RAB person," he said. "You know, the one who stole the real locket? He said in his note he was going to destroy it, didn't he?"

Hermione reached into her endless bag and recovered the fake Horcrux, which still had the note with it. "'I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can'," she read to them.

"Well, what if he did finish it off?" Ron offered.

"Or she," Hermione amended.

"Whichever," said Ron, "It'd be one less for us to do!"

"Don't be lazy, you great Horklump," Draco sighed, and chucked a pillow at their ginger member.

"We're still going to have to try and trace the real locket, aren't we?" said Hermione. "To find out whether or not it's destroyed."

"And once we get hold of it, how do you destroy a Horcrux?" Ron asked, and cut to the heart of it all. Once they got hold of a Horcrux, they really had no idea what they'd even do with it. A weighted silence ensued, as all four of them grappled with their lack of knowledge. Finally, Harry was the first to speak.

"Dumbledore told me that Tom Riddle's diary was one of the Horcruxes," Harry said contemplatively. "I stabbed it with a Basilisk fang, and that killed it."

Draco was silent for all he was worth as they looked around at each other. "Cor," Ron said, "Well, we're just overflowing with Basilisk fangs, aren't we?"

Draco broke his own silence far too quickly, wanting to forestall any bright ideas. "Voldemort has Hogwarts. Any field trips to the Chamber of Secrets would have to go through him. If- if the Basilisk is even still usable like that."

"We'll have to find another way," Harry said resolutely, putting an arm around Draco, only to nearly jump in place when the door banged open.

"Sirius sent me to-" Luna began, only to stop at the sight of all of the piled books. "What's all this?" She picked up *Moste Dark Blood Rituals of the Demon Goddess Hecate*, staring at it wonderingly, a book which, after all, she had been the one to retrieve from Severus for them.

"Oh, just a bit of organizing," Hermione said in her brisk lying voice, and Luna's sharp face whirled to stare at her accusingly.

"What are you four up to?" Luna said suspiciously, and a surefire pout extended from her lower lip, at what must be becoming a common experience for her over the past weeks: being left out. "Cousin?"

"Nothing for you to worry about, Luna-Luna," Draco said hastily, and got up to grasp her by the shoulders, the better to divert her attention from Hermione's books.

"I hate it when you say that," Luna sighed, head drooping, and Draco caught her chin with a finger and pushed it up.

"There, there, cousin, I promise you aren't missing anything interesting," Draco cooed falsely, and Luna made a sniffling sound before delivering the explanation of her mission.

"Sirius sent me to get the four of you. He wants you to come and see him. It sounded important," Luna recited, only to sag as she added, "He wouldn't tell me what that was about either."

As it turned out, Sirius had sent for them, but the one who really needed to see them was Arthur Weasley. Mr. Weasley wanted to take them immediately to the Burrow. It would be Harry's first time leaving Xaphan since Hogwarts had been taken.

"I don't like it any better than the rest of you," Sirius said tensely, "But it seems it's got to be done. Someone's got to see the four of you, and he won't leave Arthur alone until he does."

"Has Voldemort been taking a more diplomatic approach?" Draco quipped. "Don't let yourself be sucked in by those dreamy snake eyes."

Mr. Weasley gave Draco a rather severe glare, while Luna hovered at the edges, not even trying to pretend she wasn't listening in. "It's not You-Know-Who waiting for you, Draco," Mr. Weasley said tiredly. "It's the Minister of Magic."

The Burrow was packed head-to-toe with members of the Order, many of whom had already been at Xaphan in preparation for Harry's birthday party. This was a far cry from that. It gave rather the feeling of a much-protected meeting between foreign powers. Mad-Eye Moody, for one, was greeting them so ill-temperedly, it seemed certain some of their number did not approve of this. Leaving the cushioning security of Xaphan for even seconds was too much in some people's book for someone as precious to their cause as Harry Potter. Draco found himself half-inclined to the same opinion, despite knowing how soon they were to departing the safety of Xaphan forever. At the summons of the Minister, fat load of good he had ever done for them.

Scrimgeour was still Scrimgeour, scraggly and wild-enough looking for Luna to still have suspected him a vampire if she had been there to see him, notwithstanding the sunlight that poured into the sitting room where they met. There was only room for three to sit on the sofa, once Scrimgeour took Mr. Weasley's shabby armchair, so Draco elected to stand. That seemed to make Scrimgeour uneasy. As well it should.

The four of them had come as soon as possible, which meant they were all in the summer Muggle clothes they'd been wearing at Xaphan. Scrimgeour was naturally dressed as a wizard, which cast a contrast of authority between them, but Scrimgeour didn't carry himself like he felt it. Draco almost questioned how such a character could have been named Minister of Magic.

"I have some questions for the four of you, and I think it will be best if we do it individually. If you three," he pointed at the sofa, "Can wait upstairs, I will start with Mr. Black."

"We're not going anywhere," Harry protested predictably. "You can speak to us together, or not at all."

"I really must insist," Scrimgeour said coldly, long-haired and yellow-eyed and about as amenable to them as he would have been a marauding bunch of Death Eaters wearing anti-Ministry slogans. "With Mr. Black present, I am sure you all understand the necessity."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry blurted, outraged, but Draco held up a hand to forestall his reaction.

"Very well. If my presence is so pernicious, speak to the three of them together, then I'll discuss the will with you alone. Does that suit you?" Scrimgeour was willing to compromise, it turned out, though he didn't exactly look thrilled about it.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Ron hissed to Draco as he made his way out. "Don't let him catch you in any traps."

"Can't. It's not like Dumbledore will have left me anything," Draco whispered back in a friendly tone before departing.

The Order did not look pleased for Draco to have left the room Harry was inside, as if even that small bit more protection could potentially prove vital. Draco didn't know if they expected Scrimgeour to leap on Harry and try to end him, at least non-metaphorically. He settled himself on a settee near the door and wished he could outright eavesdrop, but no Extendable Ears had made the trip with him. Not that he would have had the gall to do so with Severus one of the guards watching. All he could do was wait.

It seemed to stretch on forever, without a book to wait with, and no one on the Order willing to break the tense silence. There was the sound of some raised voices, but they lowered too soon for anyone to feel the need to bust into the room. Draco wished they had gone on longer, to give him the pretext. Finally, though, the other three filed out, none of them looking happy. Harry had in hand something small, Hermione a book, and Ron some device that Draco didn't get a good enough look at to identify. He was called in himself too quickly.

He took a seat on the sofa, facing Scrimgeour down with a coldness to match the man's haughty demeanor, wondering if he was to be quizzed now on the possessions the other three had received. The farthest thing on his mind was the possibility of Dumbledore having left Draco anything in his will.

Scrimgeour cleared his throat. He didn't waste time whatsoever with pleasantries. Either his patience had already been worn to the quick by the other three, or he didn't think Draco worthy of them. He already had out a scroll, which he lifted up for Draco to see. "'The Last Will and Testament of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.' Many of the items here are not executable, since he left so much of what he had at Hogwarts or to Hogwarts. But he had put aside items outside Hogwarts for a few of his students, which came to light after his death."

"I don't know why you wanted to talk to me about this," Draco said, as civilly as he could manage. "None of this has anything to do with me."

"On the contrary, Mr. Black," Scrimgeour said with eyes like a hawk. "You are known as one of the cleverest students at Hogwarts, are you not?"

"There's not a Hogwarts anymore to speak of," Draco said levelly, "But I appreciate the compliment."

Scrimgeour's eyes flared with annoyance, facing Draco down with the unwavering hostility that a man usually reserved only for a known enemy. "You may have some insight, then. Let me read you this portion of the will. 'To Ronald Bilius Weasley, I leave my Deluminator, in the hope that he will remember me when he uses it.' Does it surprise you that Dumbledore would have left Ronald Weasley such a rare and expensive object?"

"No," Draco said honestly. "Why shouldn't he?"

"By reports, Dumbledore and Mr. Weasley were not close. Why, out of so many students Dumbledore taught over the years, would he single out Mr. Weasley for such a gift?"

Draco fought back the urge to roll his eyes. "Because Ron was friends with Harry," he said impatiently, not bothering to hold back part of the truth. It was simple common sense. "And Dumbledore was really fond of Harry, of course, so he gave nice things to Harry and his friends, I'd imagine. Doesn't exactly sound like the most sinister dark act the old bat's ever been accused of." Draco squinted at Scrimgeour, trying to work out what the man was playing at. "I take it he gave things to Harry and Hermione too."

"'To Miss Hermione Jean Granger, I leave my copy of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, in the hope that she will find it entertaining and instructive.' Are you familiar with this text?"

Draco shrugged as comfortably as he could make himself appear. "I grew up in the wizarding world, they're fairy tales. I know them. And if you knew Hermione, you wouldn't see much out of the ordinary with deciding to give her a *book.*"

"This book, though," Scrimgeour said ominously. "Is an... odd choice. Did you ever discuss codes, or any means of passing secret messages, with Dumbledore?"

"Are you kidding me?" Draco said incredulously. "You're asking the wrong person. Harry may have been close with Dumbledore, but I wasn't. Not at all. If anything, we didn't see eye to eye, him and I. You'd know better than I would what the old bastard was ever thinking."

"Despite your..." Scrimgeour's upper lip curled in distaste, a quite unattractive sight. "Closeness with Mr. Potter." Scrimgeour's eyes flicked down briefly to Draco's HJP pendant, as if wishing he didn't have to see it.

"Despite the fact that I'm Harry's boyfriend, yeah," Draco said equably, and enjoyed watching how it made that old-fashioned man wince. Not that one could ever tell how much people objected to them because they were two boys, and how much simply because it was *Draco.* "I haven't exactly been rendered prostrate with mourning by the man's loss, if you catch my drift."

Scrimgeour resumed his scrutiny of the will. "'To Harry James Potter, I leave the Snitch he caught in his first Quidditch match at Hogwarts, as a reminder of the rewards of perseverance and skill.' Why do you think Dumbledore would leave Harry this Snitch?"

"Like I said," Draco repeated, starting to get peeved, "I wouldn't know why Dumbledore did anything. You'd be better off asking literally anyone else. Dumbledore would have laughed at the idea that I had any special channel into his thoughts or plans." Draco feared he was laying it on a bit thick, but he couldn't help leaning on the truth.

"You meant nothing to Dumbledore," Scrimgeour echoed, and Draco had the oddest feeling this was one of those traps Ron had warned him about falling into.

"Nothing," Draco agreed.

"Then why," Scrimgeour said, eyes glinting with triumph, "Would he have left you the most valuable item of all of his students? Look here, Mr. Malfoy-"

"It's Black-"

"'To Draco Lupin Black, I leave the Sword of Gryffindor, as a reminder of our edifying chats this past year,'" Scrimgeour read like the cat who'd caught the canary. "Does that sound like a man who held you out of favor?"

Draco might never have been so flummoxed in his life. He couldn't have put on a better show of shock if he tried, jaw unhinging and color flying to his face. "Dumbledore," Draco repeated, to be sure he had understood. "Left me the Sword of Gryffindor. Me."

"Yes," Scrimgeour said firmly, "Despite the fact that, be you Slytherin or Ravenclaw, you are no Gryffindor. Can you account for this?"

"No," Draco said, shaken. "You must be having me on. That's impossible."

"Do you think he meant for you to give it to a Gryffindor friend of yours to wield? Mr. Potter, for instance? Was Mr. Potter the true intended recipient of such a fabulous prize?"

"I don't know," was all Draco could muster. "Maybe he wanted to tell the world I'm a Gryffindor after all. Though it seems the Sorting Hat had chances enough to proclaim that- and really, red and gold do nothing for my complexion-"

"Do you find this amusing, Mr. Black?" Scrimgeour growled. "Because I do not. Why would Dumbledore want Potter to have the Sword of Gryffindor? Was it because Dumbledore believed that only the sword of Godric Gryffindor could defeat the Heir of Slytherin? Did he wish to give Potter that sword because he believed, as do many, that he is the one destined to destroy He Who Must Not Be Named?"

"Wow," Draco said. "Crazy theory, much appreciation for that. Except all this speculation is missing something about the Sword of Gryffindor. Where *is* it?"

"Unfortunately," Scrimgeour said wanly, "That sword was not Dumbledore's to give away. The sword of Godric Gryffindor is an important historical artifact-"

"Wait, so you're not *giving* it to me?" Draco exhaled in disbelief. "You're taking it for yourselves?"

"An important historical artifact, and as such, belongs in the protection of the Ministry of Magic, not in the hands of a-"

"Give it to me," Draco interrupted curtly. "Wherever you have it, you have to find it and give it to me!"

"For someone who was not expecting a gift," Scrimgeour observed warily, "You seem very insistent to receive yours."

"Because Dumbledore wanted me to have it!" Draco exclaimed. "Shouldn't that be reason enough?"

"You claimed you hold Dumbledore in contempt-"

"For- I don't know, personal reasons!" Draco exploded. "That doesn't mean he wasn't the head of the opposition to the Dark Lord, you-" Draco only barely managed to hold back the insult on his tongue. All his cleverness seemed to have deserted him in the grips of raw desperation. He knew the side of light got hold of the Sword of Gryffindor. He knew, for one, that Neville Longbottom slayed Nagini with it. "Dumbledore beat *Grindelwald*. No one knew more about defeating dark wizards than him. So if he thought I needed to have it, then you had better-"

This conversation was falling rapidly out of Draco's control, if it had ever been in it. "You change your tune quickly," Scrimgeour said quietly. "Nonetheless, the fact remains, the Sword of Gryffindor is not mine nor his to give away to anyone-"

"If you have it," Draco said through gritted teeth, "You have to give it to me. Otherwise you're a traitor."

Scrimgeour drew back in his chair, affronted. "What I am is the Minister of Magic," he said fiercely. "Surely you must have forgotten that, to speak to me this way."

"If you go against the final will of Dumbledore," Draco said decisively, "Then you're a traitor. A traitor to the wizarding world. A criminal who might as well throw in his lot with Voldemort, because you-"

"I will not suffer this from a seventeen-year-old!" Scrimgeour shouted. "The Ministry of Magic is doing everything they can to combat-"

"Then do this," Draco said, and saw not a hope of alteration on Scrimgeour's affronted craggy face. "This is how you combat him. Give me what's rightfully mine. Minister, if you think things are going to hold this much longer, you're wrong. Voldemort has taken Hogwarts. How long until he takes the Ministry of Magic?"

Scrimgeour got up and limped towards the door. "I will hear no more of this-"

"Either you'll give in to him," Draco said, with the surety of foreknowledge and his patience all gone, "But I don't think you're the kind of man to do that- or he'll kill you, Minister. He *will* kill you, no matter how old and important you are, no matter what titles you hold. He'll kill you and do you really want one of the last things you ever did be to have defied the will of Albus Dumbledore?"

Scrimgeour had out his wand then, whirling it and lifting it in Draco's direction. Then he seemed to think better, a note of what almost looked like fear in his aged eyes, before he left the room, slamming the door behind him.

Birthdays and Weddings

As it turned out, Scrimgeour had been more right than he knew, to hold their inheritance under the Decree for Justifiable Confiscation. Hermione let out a shrill cry when they arrived at Xaphan, and claimed she had just been startled by the Apparition. Nor did she give anything away when Sirius and Remus seriously questioned them about their meeting with Scrimgeour. But the minute she could drag them all, birthday boy included, to a deserted alcove, she produced her book from Dumbledore and waved it excitedly before them. "Look!" she cried out, before trying to muffle her own voice behind her spare hand. "Look, the book he gave me changed!"

"I don't know, I just see *Tales of Beetle the Bard*," Ron said, and Hermione looked half-torn between whacking and kissing him.

"That's the cover!" she exclaimed. "But I felt it pulse in my hands, and look, I was right, the text inside has all changed!"

Draco opened the front, and words greeted him immediately that made him understand. The contents were *Tales of Beetle the Bard* no longer. This book was called *Secrets of the Darkest Art*, and when Harry reached over and pulled it open to a random page, the words jumped out at all of them, enough to make Ron step back: *Creation of the Horcrux*. Draco shuddered at it and quickly closed it.

"It's one of the books that Dumbledore had on Horcruxes!" Hermione said, clapping her hands together as they took the book each to examine it. "Oh, and I had been so worried about leaving it at Hogwarts to the Death Eaters! He found a way to smuggle it out to us, right under the Ministry's nose!"

"How did he do it?" Ron said, baffled. "Ministry experts have been at this for a month and they didn't find anything!"

"Advanced magic," Draco said with reluctant admiration. "Obscure, likely. Dumbledore magic." Maybe even dark magic, for once.

"There must have had some kind of trigger," Hermione said excitedly. "Whether it was the arrival at Xaphan, or... oh, what's important is that he got it to us! If there's a secret to destroying a Horcrux, we'll find it inside here!" Hermione looked raring to go off and read.

"Just don't get too carried away," Ron said, taking out his Deluminator and fussing about with it. "Remember, it is Harry's birthday."

"Draco," Harry said immediately, interrupting his own prospect of celebration, serious-eyed seventeen-year-old Harry, "Draco, what happened with Scrimgeour?"

Draco forced a smile, aware he had not exactly been at his best that day. "Don't worry. We'll talk about all that tomorrow. Tonight, it's all about you, birthday boy."

Harry had already received several presents that day, from the traditional watch for a wizard coming-of-age from the Weasleys, to an enchanted Sneakoscope from Hermione which was probably something useful for their travels anyway. Bill and Fleur had contributed an enchanted razor for shaving, the Delacours chocolate, and Fred and George a great mass of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes products, the vast majority of which Harry would never have the time to use. But there was one present left waiting for Harry, which Harry was curious about as his party started: his boyfriend's.

"I'll give it to you later in private," Draco said, which prompted a number of salacious hoots, and an embarrassed grin from a newly-arrived Neville. Luna clapped her hands together, clearly sharing a brain with Ron as to what kind of present a private one was likely to be. Hermione scolded them all, but with a smile on her face too.

There was a great grassy space in Xaphan that was yet unconquered by the reconstruction efforts, out past the new Gryffindor Tower. Sirius was of the opinion that it should be fitted out as a Quidditch pitch in time for the fall, so their star players need not miss so much as a practice at their new home. As such, no stones or towers covered the green plain. Nothing was in the way but a few of Gilderoy's resting gargoyles, whom Gilderoy was quick to coax out of the way, with especially stern words for the hulking Severus gargoyle. Several tables had been set up in the center for Harry's birthday dinner, with the Weasleys hustling to make everything perfect for the day.

Hagrid arrived with great merriment, and declared it a perfect picture. After all, having the event at Xaphan did not seem to impede any of the accoutrements the occasion rightfully deserved. Draco could only hope he would be able to say the same for Bill and Fleur's wedding, mere days later.

Fred and George set up hovering golden lanterns that read 17, for one, congratulating Harry. Sirius had joined the Weasleys in the transfiguration and set-up of decorations, which meant they were Gryffindor red and gold, not like that didn't seem to please Harry. Draco might have felt a bit left out, if not for the fact that he was apparently eligible, in the eyes of no less a wizard than Albus Dumbledore, to wield the Sword of Gryffindor himself. Whatever Dumbledore had meant about remembering their 'edifying chats', which had been most strongly defined by blackmail attempts... but Draco had to put that aside, to chip in with a few extra golden streamers on the arches.

What took the cake when it came to golden, though- literally- was Harry's birthday cake, a giant golden Snitch roughly the size of a few dragon eggs. Neville let out a loud amazed gasp at the sight of it being levitated in by Mrs. Weasley, while Ginny gave several appreciative whoops. It came to a rest before Harry, filling his place at the table along with the two beside him. "This is splendid, did you bake this yourself?" Draco asked Mrs. Weasley, already knowing the answer even before she smiled at him and nodded.

If only Harry had held eyes just for the cake. It was touching that he was glancing backwards at Draco even with such a feat of dessert-craft before him, though of course Draco couldn't lie to himself- he knew the reflexive glance was because Charlie had come close to Draco, to help wish Harry a happy birthday. For Merlin's sake, it seemed that insecurity persisted even

after Charlie had butchered his hair. Draco gave the instinctively tense Harry a reassuring smile and guided his gaze back to the golden Snitch.

Harry was sung Happy Birthday by a full crowd of his friends and well-wishers, and he only had to suffer the presence of Charlie Weasley to make it happen. Afterwards, the cake was cut, and a great bunch of golden Snitches erupted from the inside, prompting great applause. Afterwards, they all stuffed themselves silly on Mrs. Weasley's wondrous creation, with Harry stealing more glances at Draco that didn't look jealous ones anymore, just appreciative.

Maybe he was also wondering what Draco had gotten him for his birthday.

He got the chance to find out late that night, when Harry snuck his way out of Gryffindor Tower to what had been dubbed Ravenclaw Tower, sole occupants Draco and Luna. Draco welcomed Harry into his room, a dorm that would probably be made the seventh year boys', and then they were finally alone.

"So," Harry said, striding over to stand over where Draco sat, an expectant tilt to his head. "Is it time for my present yet?"

"Yes it is, dragonslayer," Draco purred, and had to dodge Harry's attempt to kiss him. "Not that kind of present."

"No?" Harry looked rather crestfallen, after the fanfare their friends had made over the prospect.

"No," Draco said with a fond shake of the head. "Sorry, gorgeous. Maybe later. For now, I have an actual present for your seventeenth birthday."

"What is it?" Harry asked, curiosity getting the better of disappointment, and perched himself on the bed next to Draco. Draco reached for the trunk under his bed and withdrew a golden-wrapped object, a small one only the size of a few Snitches. Harry took it and ripped it open eagerly, only to find it a small black velvet box.

"Open it," Draco said nervously, and Harry snapped open the box, to find a glimmering important thing awaiting him.

"Oh my God," Harry breathed, hand going to his mouth struck with awe, and regarded the golden rose ring with the same amazement he had met a similar gift in fourth year, when they had joked about it being Harry wearing Draco's 'favor' for the tournament. Draco had no jokes now, nor a tracking charm on it this time. It was just a piece of gold transfigured into a smooth band with a carved whirling rose at the top, laid out as offering to Harry Potter, should he choose to accept it.

Harry did, putting it on his dominant ring finger immediately. He lifted it up to the light to stare at it there, looking swept away. "This is really for me? Draco, what does this mean-"

"It's just like it was in fourth year," Draco said quickly, not wanting to seem to be truly getting ahead of himself. Remus, for one, would slaughter him in cold blood if this was anything like it seemed for that moment it could be: a proposal. "It's a piece of jewelry I transfigured for you, since you don't have one, and I think you always wanted one. I don't think it's exactly like the one you lost in the graveyard, but..."

Harry seized Draco and pulled him into a wondering embrace. "If it's just jewelry," Harry whispered in his ear, "Then why didn't you want to give it to me in front of the others?"

"I didn't want anyone to get the wrong idea," Draco said, embarrassed, and smoothed his finger over the ring on Harry's hand, admiring how perfectly it really did fit there. "Happy birthday, Harry Potter. Congratulations on your coming of age."

"Don't be so formal," Harry said softly. "I can't believe I just get to *have* this. That you made this for me. It's as if there has to be a catch somewhere."

There wasn't, this time. "No, it's just natural, right? Matches mine," Draco said abashedly, and held out the HJP pendant from his neck. "I have something from you, so now you have something of mine."

"It doesn't have your initials, though. Will you carve them onto it?" Harry slid the ring off and handed it back to Draco.

"Are you sure?" Draco said quietly, heart flipping in his chest, the moment indeed feeling like some unspoken covenant.

"Yes, I'm sure," Harry laughed, only to shake the ring away when Draco focused his gaze on the inside of the ring. "No, I want it on the outside. DLB. Please."

Only a moment of careful transfiguration, and the request was done. Harry put the ring back on his finger, and the underside now bore the initials DLB like something indelible.

"Okay," Draco said with a quirk of his lip. "*Now* you get your other present from me, if you like."

This time, when Harry kissed Draco, gleaming ring finger tangling in Draco's long hair, Draco didn't try to stop him. "Wait, Harry," Draco breathed, "I have to tell you something. Dumbledore left me something-"

"Mmm hmm," Harry breathed, clearly not absorbing a word. "Let's talk about it tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," Draco agreed.

Clothes came off at a record pace, with the only things remaining on them soon the initials necklace and the golden ring. "You are beautiful, you know that?" Draco said breathlessly, eyes feasting on Harry wearing nothing but the ring Draco had made him. "I don't tell you that enough. You're the most beautiful thing in the world, and I..."

"Enough talking," Harry said hungrily, rolling on top of Draco and putting their bodies into aching proximity. "It's my birthday, isn't it? Please don't make me wait any longer."

"Whatever you say," Draco purred, staring up at Harry rapt, thoroughly enraptured. "You're in charge. Just tell me what you want."

"I want to be..." Harry still had difficulty saying exactly what he needed, but Draco delighted in making him assert himself like this, some glance of the strong confident man he would someday become. "I want to be in you," he admitted in a rush, and Draco's face fell unguarded with a bright open smile.

"Do it," Draco said eagerly, reaching for his wand and doing the spells all in one gasp, so ready he found he was for Harry. "Go ahead, Harry. I'm yours, after all. You know I'm all yours... mmm," he groaned as Harry moved into place to. "That's right. Take me..."

The feeling of first being breached by Harry was indescribable every time, something like the darkness in him being put aside in abeyance, set to the side and displaced by the perfect strength of Harry Potter. Draco imagined himself filled with light as Harry thrust inside him, green eyes without glasses so liquid and pure and adorable up this close, all defenseless, all absorbed in him in turn. His arms went up to wrap around Harry's torso, his body begging for more already, and Harry obliged him.

Only a few thrusts, though, and Harry was gasping and drawing back, laughing incredulously. "Dragon," he exhaled, "Your nails," and when he twisted sideways, Draco could see the marks he'd left scratched into Harry's gorgeous back. "Look what you did."

"Guess you'll have to watch where my hands go," Draco said lightly, completely unapologetic, and Harry let out a giddy laugh and picked up his wand where it sat on the bedside table beside Draco's and his glasses.

"Don't think I will. Manibipiscatus?" Harry sighed, not a spell but a question, and Draco gave him a filthy look through his eyelashes.

"No, use ropes this time," Draco was brave enough to say, only to be stalled when Harry said confoundedly,

"But we don't have any rope."

Draco snorted, stretching his arms expectantly above his head for Harry to bind if he liked. "You do know the spell, don't you?"

"Oh- right! Incarcerous," Harry cast quickly, casual in his power. There was no need to put on a show of it when Harry was already so strong. Draco let out a low moan as ropes sprouted from Harry's wand and snaked around to encircle both of his wrists, sliding to entrap each several times before going up to the bedposts to bind him securely there. "Is this okay?" Harry asked as the ropes did their work, slow and soft enough to be a caress. Draco nodded enthusiastically, so Harry at last tightened them, the slack disappearing and making Draco moan louder.

"I guess I'll always need my wand close by if I'm going to be with you."

Draco laughed, feeling his eyes crease half-closed in a wild smile. "Yeah, you will, Harry," he taunted back. "But you've captured me now, haven't you?"

Harry's gaze went soft and awed at the sight of Draco bound up in the ropes he'd conjured, as if there was something far more special and profound there than just what he saw. "Captured," Harry agreed, and kissed him wet and artless and hungry, making the lower half of Draco's body strain up for contact. Harry's weight fell into place on top of him, and Draco tried to squirm to get what he wanted, but it wasn't until Harry made the move that their bodies came fully together again.

"Do it hard," Draco urged Harry, feeling deliciously at his mercy. "Give it to me, Harry..."

Harry used Draco's hair to tug him into a kiss as he thrust in, cutting off his words. Merlin, Draco had such a weakness for the feeling of Harry pulling his hair.., "That's right," Draco purred against Harry's mouth, like he was riding a wave soon to crest. "That's right, Harry... love this... love *you*..."

"Love you," Harry panted back, green eyes very heavy on him, and very certain. "Love you so, so much."

Harry didn't last long after that, but then again, neither did Draco. The feeling of the ropes was so new to them and so stimulating, it was a miracle either lasted any time at all, after Harry had spelled them into place. Draco felt the lower half of his body stay melted and heavy even after the ropes came off, sparks flickering down his legs.

Harry seemed similarly sated, curling up behind Draco and wrapping his arms around him after he spelled the ropes away. He seemed weary enough to drop right away, but it came to Draco's mind, then, that he'd forgotten something.

"Wait, before you go to sleep, there's something I have to tell you," Draco breathed in a sleepy Harry's ear, pausing for effect before delivering the unbelievable truth. "Dumbledore left me the Sword of Gryffindor."

"The Sword of Gryffindor," Ron said disbelievingly, while Draco plucked the Deluminator from Ron's hands to play about with. "Dumbledore left you, Draco Black, the Sword of bleeding Gryffindor."

"*Frankenstein*?" Hermione breathed in just as shocked a tone, sounding like she thought he had to be joking. "Oh- stop that!" she said, grabbing the device Draco had been switching on and off and preventing the flickering of lights.

"Is that so hard to believe?" Draco said suavely, letting the Deluminator go to enjoy the gobsmacked looks on his friends' faces.

"Yes," Ron said, mouth hanging open. "I'd sooner believe you'd ditched Harry for one of Lockhart's gargoyles!"

"Why wouldn't Dumbledore give it to a Gryffindor?" Luna asked skeptically.

"Why would he ever give it to *Draco*?" Ginny cut in impatiently. "Didn't Draco despise him?"

"Okay, despise is a strong word," Draco hedged, despite it being an accurate one.

"I haven't been able to wrap my head around it either," Harry said with a guilty look towards Draco. "Maybe he thought Draco would know best what to do with it?"

"Like give it to Harry," Draco provided. "That's what Scrimgeour suggested."

"But then why wouldn't Dumbledore just have left it right to Harry?" Ron asked.

Luna shrugged, as confused as the rest of them. "Maybe he wanted to make Draco feel included?"

They all contemplated each other, after this bogus suggestion that was still better than any other they had. "Make him feel like he was meant to be a part of..." Hermione trailed off, looking acutely aware of Ginny and Luna's presence. But everyone who knew of the Horcrux hunt to come surely understood.

"Or," Ron said, looking eager to draw attention away from that part, "There's a simpler explanation. Maybe there's something or someone he wanted Draco to use the sword on."

"Someone he wanted me to kill with it?" Draco mused. "I am rather known for the killing, at this point. On my calling card, see, right alongside the blood magic and the spectacular hair."

"Whatever he meant it for," Harry said with a sigh, "It's a pity Draco couldn't get it."

"No, that's fine," Draco said more happily, and almost said, *We can just steal it back,* but for the presence of Luna. That one-time Rat Thief would take him far too seriously.

Maybe Draco had not been in the right headspace to demand dueling practice, the morning of the wedding of all times. But given their plans, it wasn't like he had the whole summer, as Sirius and Remus would think, to waltz in and out practicing with his elders. If he was going to be ready, he had to be ready now, and a whim told him to test it against one of the fiercest duelists he knew: Sirius Black.

Draco had never had the best record against Sirius, save for the times he used dark magic, but even dark magic did not suffice this time. He was pelting Sirius with fireballs one minute, almost laughing at the rush of it, and then without warning he had been knocked out, everything going immediately black. It took him being Enervated and a minute of explanation for him to untangle that Sirius had caught him with a simple Stupefy and felled

him. It was so very short a stretch of time, to have gone from the high he felt last night with Harry to feeling utterly useless and pathetic again.

"Are you serious?" Draco said in disbelief, Sirius looking on almost sheepishly while Remus worried over Draco. "Stupefy? That's all it took?"

"It's a matter of reflexes, my boy," Sirius put in while getting daggers from Remus. "You see, your good old Uncle Sirius still has a few tricks up his sleeve-"

"It's not fair! I need to be better than this!" Draco exclaimed, hearing the brattiness in his own voice and having to fight to curtail a full unsightly tantrum. "I can't go down that easy! I can't!"

"Draco," Remus said, seeming alarmed at Draco's distress. "It was one duel. You don't need to be so hard on yourself-"

"I do, though!" Draco exploded, leaping to his feet despite his wobbly head. "I have to win! I always have to *win*!" He made his undignified exit stomping away from his uncles into a nearby gazebo, where he flung himself despondently, willing the entire world to leave him alone while he grieved for his unfounded self-confidence.

Remus, naturally, did not leave well enough alone. He seemed to have had the sense to send Sirius away as the offending party, but he didn't do the same with himself, his footsteps plodding into the gazebo. "Draco?" Remus called. "Draco, how are you doing? Does your head hurt?"

Draco's chest hurt, at the proof of his own insufficiency. He was lucky he'd self-medicated this morning with one of the huge supply of draughts of peace Hermione was bringing along in her unending bag. Remus's virtuous concerned face coming into view only made his chest hurt worse, though, at the reminder he'd taken this feeling out on two people who so little deserved it.

"My head is fine," Draco muttered, trying to make light of what had happened. "My pride, not so much, but that'll heal."

"Draco, darling, you don't have to be perfect," Remus insisted, sitting down beside Draco on the hard stone. "I know you wouldn't agree, but you really are too hard on yourself. No one wins one hundred percent of the time..."

"Then I'm dead," Draco said flatly, knowing he should go along with Remus but unable to let this go. "I'm dead and Harry's probably dead too."

"No, sweetheart," Remus said patiently, "Because it's not all on your shoulders. We'll be here to help too. All the Order has devoted themselves to Harry's protection..."

Draco tuned out the words Remus meant to be encouraging, thinking bitterly how little Remus knew, how much he would be thrust on virtually his own devices in the days to come. But there was no telling the adults that before they left, Draco himself had been so adamant on that. So Remus could not possibly understand why the loss had spooked Draco so badly.

"Don't worry so much, Draco," Remus finished, putting an arm around him. "You really are exceptional, and not just for your age. Don't let this change how you think about yourself. And you know if you ever need anything, Sirius and I will always be here..."

That's the problem, though, Draco thought spitefully, *You won't,* although he knew it wasn't their fault, it was Dumbledore's. "I just want to be better," he sighed, "For everyone's sake," and leaned back against Remus, letting himself take comfort in what he knew could be the very last time Remus ever gave him a hug. He relished in something good, before it would be taken away.

It was the day of a wedding, not a funeral. Draco had to make his best effort to raise his spirits again. To do so, he went on a wedding mission. He found Severus coming out of Gilderoy's library tower, soon to become a universal library tower with Gilderoy moved elsewhere. To be executed in large part, thankfully, after the wedding, which meant that Draco would be too busy Horcrux-hunting to offer a hand moving.

"Helping with the move?" Draco called in a friendly tone, and Severus whirled on him with a disproportionate level of offense.

"Hardly," Severus said, long and contemptuous, as if offering assistance to Gilderoy was akin to leaking information to the Dark Lord. "What do you want?"

"Well," Draco said with undaunted brightness, falling into step beside his godfather as they tracked the path back towards the dungeons, outside in the midday sunlight. "As it happens, you know, there will be an occasion on Xaphan tomorrow."

"I am well aware," Severus said, mood audibly worsened by this reminder of merriment. "As vital as it is for me to spend time at Xaphan- to assist in the rebuilding effort and prepare my classroom," he added sharply after, as if to be certain no one could mistake his presence as stemming from any other motive. "As vital as it is, I am informed and will thus see fit to steer well clear of this castle on the date in question."

That was exactly the anti-party spirit Draco had both expected and feared in his beloved godfather. Luckily, he already had a plan of attack for that eventuality. "You might be right to avoid it," Draco sighed dramatically, resting his chin on his hand in the pose of being deep in thought as they walked. "So many strangers will be coming to Xaphan for the wedding. All those unknowns arriving from Miss Delacour's side of proceedings. It's a rare opportunity for the Dark Lord to infiltrate the Order's fortress. You'll be much safer at a distance from such a time of liability."

Severus stopped in his tracks, shooting him a wan look of displeasure. "What are you saying, Draco? Are you suggesting I am not attending because I *fear* the wedding?"

"No, no, not *my* godfather," Draco said breezily, coming to a stop with his murderous-looking companion. "Only that you'll be lucky, to be out of the firing line. For those of us who feel obliged to attend, like me, we won't be so lucky, but..." Draco heaved a dramatic sigh. "We'll

be surrounded by *most* of the Order. I suppose that will make me and Harry and everyone feel safe *enough*."

A war was unfolding on Severus's sour face. "Your protection on such an occasion," he said as if reluctant, "May still be found lacking, with so many unknown variables."

"Don't worry, I'm sure I'll be fine," Draco said, waiting for the predictable surrender to his faultless play.

It was not long in coming. "It seems I must attend, then," Severus said through gritted teeth, "To help ensure the safety of those in attendance from any wrongdoing. To keep my infernal godson from falling prey to any incursions to Xaphan. Is that what you are implying, young fiend?"

"I'm not implying anything," Draco said equably, "Though of course I would feel far *safer* with you at the wedding." He blew his cover by crowing out, "This afternoon! Don't be late!"

It had been so rare and yet effortless a victory over Severus, Draco could hardly believe his luck as Severus groaned out his reluctant agreement to attend Bill and Fleur's "foolhardy shooting gallery of a wedding."

It *was* funny how Xaphan had gone from the ancestral secret of House Black, only shared with the heirs of House Black and occasionally their unfortunate paramours, to such a public thoroughfare at large. One could only use such a descriptor for a locale so currently inundated with Delacours.

"Xaphan could never have stayed just the Order's secret," Remus said in Draco's ear, catching the direction of his gaze and something of its complexion. "Not with the school year to come. It was always bound to be opened up to the public, no matter what dangers hang attendant upon that choice. It falls in the end on us to be ready for them."

"I know," Draco sighed grumpily. "I know, I know. It's just... couldn't two dashing young people like Bill and Fleur have gone for a nice romantic elopement?"

"And break Molly Weasley's heart?" Sirius cut in breezily, coming up behind them and pressing a kiss to the back of Remus's head. "Well, I never, Draco. It'd take far more than a war to put that woman off giving her firstborn a proper wedding."

Squeals arose from the Veela clan's arrivals, seeming taken with the stark sight of Xaphan with its great rising obsidian towers. It was a very different sight in truth than the barely adorned ruin that had hosted Sirius and Remus's wedding. The efforts of all of its rebuilders gave it the aspect, if not of a full inviting castle like Hogwarts, at least of something grand and imposing and dauntless.

One person who seemed impressed was Cedric Diggory, who arrived arm-in-arm with Tonks. Tonks must have taken a much friendlier attitude towards her protégé's overtures, to have brought him as her plus-one. Cedric was annoyingly handsome as ever, making a striking pair

with Tonks, who was blonde today for the wedding. Draco wondered if that had to do with the tradition of sun colors, in which Luna and her father had thoroughly partaken.

Xenophilius Lovegood was indeed as yellow as the sun in his tasseled cap, sporting the symbol of the Deathly Hallows around his neck and drawing Draco's morbid attention. Luna matched him, with a sunflower in her hair that had to be conjured, given the pair were unlikely to have left Xaphan. "Sun colors to a wedding, for luck," Luna said, voice not reproachful, but Draco still plucked at his own filmy silver-blue robes with ruefulness. Well, *Harry* had said he thought Draco looked nice in them.

Better than Severus, of course, who was glowering at every arrival like a sentinel, dressed in the plainest old black robes imaginable. Ron was looking over at Severus terrorizing a pair of sniffy Veela and sniggering, until the arrival of Hermione with Sleek-Eazy hair and a fetching lilac dress made him visibly forget anything else. "Hermione," Ron said in a stilted tone, seemingly unable to find words. "You look..."

"You can compliment me if you like, you know," Hermione laughed, looking rather taken with Ron's admiration. "I am your girlfriend, after all." Draco heartily approved when Ron answered this salvo with a quick but feeling kiss, making up for his lack of eloquence. Hermione beamed all the sunnier on that clement summer afternoon.

Everything in the tent was set in white and purple and gold, overlaying the Quidditch field-to be with its romantic splendor, from the purple carpet to Fred and George's gilded balloons. Pillars were covered in flowers, a reminder of Hermione's birthday parties past that made him eager to see Neville. Neville arrived with his parents in their finest, only to be swept away from his indulgent mother and father by his enthusiastic girlfriend. Neville didn't seem to mind the daffodil-yellow bloom of Luna. If anything, he seemed more enchanted by her than ever. Absence in that case had clearly made the heart grow fonder, to judge by the kisses Luna kept poutily demanding from Neville.

As for Harry, he was in standard black dress robes, nothing fancy compared to this colorful lot, but the robes still gave Draco the distinct urge to see what was underneath them. He was silhouetted by the wedding tent behind him, the pale gold striking a dramatic contrast with his dark hair, and the gold ring on his finger made Draco's stupid brain indulge for a moment in the most impossible fantasies, far more impossible than mere sexual ones, fantasies that one day the tent might belong to them, for them to...

Only if the hero of the wizarding world was eccentric enough to throw a wedding with his lover's corpse.

The wedding itself was beautiful and thankfully unremarkable, no Death Eaters swooping down like at Sirius and Remus's, despite Severus's constant grimaces and glances around as if expecting them. Bill and Fleur were lawfully wedded, not that Draco found that overly interesting. But soon the wedding turned to dancing, a brilliant golden dance floor unfolding enchanted before them, with tables and chairs and refreshments behind it. The wedding had been limited largely to immediate family and those already familiar or trusted with Xaphan, but there were still more than enough revelers soon to fill up the dance floor with their excitement.

Draco found himself seized upon and dragged to the floor almost immediately by a rather enthusiastic Chosen One, who was so far past caring if others saw their public displays of affections, it veered almost more strongly towards the other extreme. Draco was proud, though, to be enfolded so overtly in the arms of the one and only Harry Potter before all their friends, much to the aplomb of Fred and George before they found Veela cousins of their own to dance with.

They passed no few of their friends paired off as they traversed the floor. Draco was pleased to watch not only Ron but Neville too show the courage to ask his significant other to dance. Ginny also caused a minor stir amongst her relations by dragging her date Millie onto the dance floor, which was all to the good as far as Draco was concerned. Keep Millie as occupied as possible so she had no time to ask Draco any inconvenient questions.

Eventually, Draco tired, and Harry said he would find Draco a drink, though as soon as he left Draco's side, he was waylaid by his predictable share of admirers. He could be some time yet.

Draco rested against one of the flower-twined pillars and let his mind drift as he observed the wedding guests, with two of his favorites turning up near enough to undertake some semi-unintentional eavesdropping. He had to stifle his laughter at the sound of their predictable conversation, with Gilderoy wheedling Severus, "Fancy a dance?" and Severus replying, "I would sooner set fire to this tent with all of its current occupants inside."

"Come off it, Severus," Gilderoy said happily, looking flushed and carried away by the festive spirit, if not also some of the floating glasses of champagne strewn around the place. He could not have cast a greater contrast with Severus's dark-haired looming figure, dressed in eye-catching golden dress robes that he had somehow procured for himself- Draco suspected Remus's generosity- with his golden hair a halo to set them off. Sun colors for the wedding, beside a man determined to embody the night. "It's a wedding, you have to dance."

"I *have* to," Severus intoned, "Do nothing of the sort," although incredibly, he was not sweeping away from Gilderoy's side at the affront.

"You have to dance," Gilderoy continued on undaunted, "So it might as well be with me, don't you think?"

"Gilderoy, just because I have on occasions ventured to *tolerate* your inane blithering, does not mean that in any universe I would lower myself to do such a thing as *dance at a wedding*..."

Their voices faded into the background as one of the guests stopped squarely before Draco. "May I have this dance?" asked Millicent Bulstrode.

There was no choice but to let her sweep him onto the floor, leading them more than competently. They had danced together before so many times, after all, often at the Heart of Winter ball, for one, and now Millie had left her girlfriend to claim that privilege once again. Draco had a sinking feeling he already knew the reason why.

"Theo," was her first whisper as the dance drew them closer together. "Draco, Ginny told me Theo is dead. Did you know that?" Draco nodded as tightly as he could manage, heart gone to his throat and heartbeat pounding so breakneck, he hoped Millie couldn't feel it through her firm grip on his hands. "Do you know how?"

"No," Draco lied, trying to put an appropriately sorrowful look on his frozen face, and hoping Millie didn't know him as well as he feared.

"It's not fair," Millie said thickly, "He was so young," in a voice like tears might have come to her then, had she been someone else. "Whatever he did, whatever he had done, he was so young. It's not fair that out of *all* of those Death Eaters that he's the one who had to die."

He was the one after me the most. And he was too clever, he was too dangerous...

"I'm so sorry, Mills," Draco sighed, and Millie pulled back from him sharply, broad face uncompromising.

"I don't need you to be sorry," she said bluntly. "I need you to help me figure out how this happened. I don't care if you and him were on different sides. We all grew up together, didn't we? We were the Kingsnakes."

Draco was the one fighting back tears then, tears he feared might betray him completely. "Millie, I don't even know where we'd start. I thought maybe he'd done something to, like, upset the Dark Lord or- or Bellatrix, to get them angry and after him, and they'd done away with him. I know you don't want me to say it, but I'm so sorry."

You're safer now that he's dead, Ginny too. Everyone is safer with Theodore Nott in the ground. I did the right thing. I have to have done the right thing- I have to- or-

Millie's face had changed to thoughtfulness, at least weighing up the idea, and Draco's pulse slowed at least that much. "And that's what he gets for getting mixed up with that kind of people, right?" she asked bitterly. "I suppose we have to just hope the same doesn't happen to Vince and Greg..."

"Those days are over, Millie," Draco said, as gently as he dared. "We can't be the Kingsnakes anymore."

"Never again," Millie agreed, and Draco was a hair's breadth from damning everything and blurting out the truth-

And then a mild commotion upset the wedding, as an unexpected guest arrived. It was not who it was but the man's demeanor that spelled ill for all of them, even before Draco had broken free of Millie and ran over to try and hear what Kingsley Shacklebolt had to tell. He just managed to make out the tail end of it, and saw Hermione do the same, hand flying to her mouth in horror.

"The Ministry has fallen. Scrimgeour is dead."

I warned you, you old fool, Draco thought ruefully. *I did warn you.*

A Stroke of Luck

The wedding was curtailed after Shacklebolt's announcement, without letting most of their guests know why. Bemused Delacours and cousins were bundled off by Fred and George and Charlie without so much as a by-your-leave. Draco and his friends ended up in a tight knot, fretfully discussing what this could mean. Ginny went off to give Millie a goodbye kiss, but when she returned, she was just as anxious as the rest of them. She jumped and started just at the voice of Alice Longbottom, calling her son over to join them to Apparate home.

Neville gave Luna a quick goodbye kiss too, and Luna was left staring after him smitten but fearful of the rest of the world. Draco put an arm around her to make her feel safer, feeling awful knowing how soon he planned to leave her. Because, after all, he had known the Ministry would fall. He had no intention of altering their plans to leave Xaphan because of it.

For tonight, though, the plan was to stay the night at least. Harry went to Ravenclaw to help Draco in their mission of composing a goodbye letter to Sirius and Remus, although the shadow of today's news from Shacklebolt hung over them as well. "They're not going to understand us going off on our own," Harry sighed. "No matter how we try and tell them it was Dumbledore's will. They're just going to want us safe where they can protect us."

"Well, you're seventeen now," Draco reminded Harry. "A full adult. That means you get to decide where you go and what protection you need. And I-" Draco was about to tell Harry that wherever they went, Draco would be protection enough, but the memory of the duel he'd lost earlier that day against Sirius smarted at him. "I'll do my best to protect you too," he finished more tamely instead, and earned a kiss to his hair for it.

Dear Sirius and Remus,

By now you should have noticed my absence, along with Harry, Ron, and Hermione. I'm sorry to have to tell you that we've left Xaphan. Harry was granted a special mission by Dumbledore that he was forbidden to share with anyone but ourselves. In order to pursue that mission, we have to go further afield than Xaphan, and leave its protection for good.

I know you both will be upset at our decision. I understand why, but this is not an alterable resolution. For whatever faults I believe he had, and all the difficulties I had with him personally, Dumbledore was our leader, our side's visionary, the only man who had a real plan for how we could possibly defeat someone with the resources and dark magic of Lord Voldemort. I believe that following his will is the only way we can possibly triumph in this war.

Dumbledore left me the Sword of Gryffindor, as you know, and I'm still not entirely certain why. But I think that he might have meant it to bind me to Harry's mission, to show that I too was meant to fight by Harry's side along with the others. I may not have the Sword of Gryffindor, but I have everything the two of you taught me, to wield as best as I can against the forces of darkness.

I will be forever grateful at your decision to adopt me and make me part of your family, and Harry too. Our decision to leave is not a disavowal of those ties. On the contrary, we want to save the wizarding world, and to save the two of you. When we fight, we will be fighting for you both.

Sincerely,

Draco Lupin Black

"Are you sure you're alright with the letter coming from you? It might make you seem like the ringleader," Harry sighed, taking Draco's hand after Draco had sealed off the letter.

"As if they won't assume I'm behind it no matter what," Draco scoffed, well aware what the optics would be after the past year's forays to Nurmengard. Harry stroked Draco's palm with his fingers, silently comforting. Draco inhaled long and strong, knowing how little time they had left in this much safety. It was only right to savor it.

Savor it they did, so much that Harry ended up spending the night with Draco for once, falling asleep in Draco's arms in his dorm. Draco was woken from blissful sleep, though, early the next morning, when Harry cried out so loudly, it seemed it must have woken the dead.

Harry was screaming and thrashing in bed, sending Draco scrambling hurriedly back away from him. When he finally opened his eyes and began to quiet, his hand went grasping feverishly up at his scar, as if to brace against an overwhelming pain there. Draco tried to hug him once he began to come to his senses, but he shook Draco off manically before seeming to finally recognize him.

"Harry? Harry, it's me, Draco. Harry, calm down. What's going on?" Draco said fearfully, having never seen Harry like this. He wondered if it had been like this when Harry found out from a dream that Theo was dead. Selfishly, Draco was afraid of what Harry might have seen this time.

"Bellatrix," Harry said wildly, looking around with his widened green eyes almost like a stranger's, almost with the radical vacancy of Voldemort's. "Bellatrix. That's what he kept screaming out. Bellatrix."

"Did something happen to her?" Draco asked, trying not to sound too eager, but he couldn't help it. Now this was a death whose news Draco could thoroughly welcome. He'd always held the superstitious belief he'd have to face her down again one last time, this time for good, but maybe, if he could have escaped it...

"Not *to* her," Harry said, raking a hand through his tousled, sweaty dark hair and trying to sit up. Draco helped him. "He was angry again. So angry. God, it hurts," he groaned, clutching at his scar again. "I don't think it's ever hurt like this before. My head is reeling..."

"Should I get Sirius and Remus?" Draco asked anxiously, but Harry seized him desperately by the side.

"Don't leave," Harry said plaintively. "It hurts so bad."

"What do you think it means?" Draco asked despite his better angels, not willing to let go of his sudden dream of Bellatrix Lestrange six feet under.

"I don't know," Harry said, and buried his face in Draco's shoulder, speaking his words muffled there. "It was just him screaming her name, over and over. Like he was so furious he couldn't even understand it. It hurt him, too. He was hurting. Voldemort. I don't understand it at all."

"Are you sure he wasn't furious she was dead?" Draco asked, reaching down to smooth a hand over Harry's clammy forehead. Maybe it was his imagination, but the scar almost seemed slightly hot to the touch, the aftermath of a brand being pressed into unprepared skin.

"No," Harry groaned. "It was her. She was the reason he was so angry. I think..." Harry squinted, taking a comforting kiss to his forehead without recognition. "I think he wanted to kill her."

There was nothing to be done then but for Harry to go to Sirius and Remus and tell them about his vision, close as they were to leaving and letting the visions be their problem alone. On their way out, though, Draco was forestalled by the appearance of Luna, who was already awake and sitting in the Ravenclaw common room. "Draco?" she said wide-eyed, her lovely face turning paler when she saw the state of Harry, dressed but no less shaken from his vision.

Draco was left to explain to Luna while Harry went on alone. Luna was filled with similar hope that the anger could be for something happening to their charming Aunt Bella, only to be filled with a similar confused disquiet as Draco at the final interpretation Harry had given of his dream.

"What does it all mean?" Luna asked worriedly, and Draco's heart ached with the realization of how soon it would be that they would depart and leave her behind. Not enough, though, not to think of the practicalities of the situation, and what might be able theoretically to destroy a Horcrux.

"I don't know. Listen, Luna," Draco said, trying to keep a level tone to avoid belying the importance of the request, "Do you think I could borrow your vial of Liquid Fiendfyre?"

As it turned out, there was no making that request sound normal and benign. "The Liquid Fiendfyre?" she asked. "I don't have it on me. Why? Do you think you're going to need it soon?"

"No, it's... it's just a precaution," Draco hedged, and Luna crossed her arms, for once not as tractable as one would like.

"A precaution for what, exactly?" Luna said suspiciously. "What are you planning to do? The four of you. Harry and Ron and Hermione. I've seen the four of you whispering your secrets and *packing* things-"

"Do you want to know the truth, Luna?" Draco let out, because it sounded like they were caught anyway. Best to let her in and avoid her going to one of the adults. "I should have told you before now anyway. I should have known I couldn't hide it forever from my clever, favorite cousin."

"Hid what?" Luna said, tapping her foot anxiously, and Draco wished he could hug her and squeeze away all the tension from those small shoulders. Not, it seemed, though, in this.

"We are going away, you're right," Draco admitted, and it did feel good to finally tell Luna. It had been so unnatural keeping a secret like this and not letting her in on it. Now he could only hope she understood. "We're leaving Xaphan today, and I don't know when we'll be back." *If ever* Draco had almost said, before he caught himself. *I don't know if we'll ever be back.*

"What?" Luna breathed, hands flying to her mouth. She took a self-protective step away from Draco, looking so floored by the revelation, it seemed she hadn't had them figured all the way out after all. Maybe it was just a matter of hearing it out loud, the intrepid insanity of what they were planning to do. "You're leaving the Order and striking out on your own? Where?"

"I don't know," Draco said truthfully. "But we can't stay here, Luna. I'm sorry."

"Is there some enemy here?" Luna said in a rush, looking around herself fitfully. "Because if there is, you don't have to go. We can protect you from whoever it is. *I* can protect you, Draco. I'm your angel, remember?"

"I know, Luna," Draco said gently, taking her shoulders, "And you are still my angel, but you can't be my guardian angel now, I'm sorry. It's nothing wrong with Xaphan, it's just that Dumbledore gave Harry something to do, and we have to go away to do it."

"Let me come with you!" Luna exclaimed immediately, staring up at Draco with her damned earnestness at full force. "I can help! Whatever it is Dumbledore wanted, I want to be by your side, cousin-"

"I'm sorry, Luna," Draco said, "It doesn't work like that, it has to just be us four," and she wrenched herself away from him, looking unfathomably betrayed.

"Why? What's wrong with me that you're leaving me out this time?"

"It's not you, Luna," Draco said uncomfortably, shifting. "It just has to be the four of us. I can't explain it any better. I'm so sorry."

"No!" Luna exclaimed, drawing further back and stamping her foot, looking mutinous. "No, I can't accept that! I can't! Since third year, I've always been part of everything! I've been in the Rat Thieves! I'm the one who helped you make the Naufragiam! I'm the one who threw it at

the Dark Lord! I'm the one who helped you get to Nurmengard! I've kept your secret about the *Battle of Hogwarts* and- *and*- since when do you not trust me enough-"

"It's not a matter of trust," Draco said helplessly, feeling the justice of her words, especially as tears came to Luna's light eyes, filling them up heartbreakingly.

"I can't believe you! How can you do this to me?" Luna cried, tears running down her cheeks, and Draco could only stand there silently, taking the full brunt of her unhappiness.

He still had to try. "Luna, we need someone at Xaphan we *can* trust," he said weakly. "Someone to make sure the school year starts okay in the fall. Someone to hold down the fort while we're gone-"

"There's Ginny and Neville for that. You're just trying to make me feel better!" Luna exclaimed, rejecting the explanation immediately as the hogwash it was. "Cousin! Don't do this! I should be at your side!"

"I'm sorry," Draco said again, and she turned on her heel and ran. Draco thought she was running away from him, until she quickly darted back and shoved something at him like an accusation.

"The Liquid Fiendfyre," she said, "It sounds like you're going to need it." As soon as he had taken it from her and pocketed it beside his telltale dagger, she ran off again down the steps, out of the tower.

He knew where she had gone in no time. He was gone to Gryffindor to help in any last-minute packing frenzy, seated in the common room with all its occupants save Ginny, when they were faced with the last intruder he ever would have suspected. It was Severus Snape, in the last place he had ever thought he would see him: willingly inside anywhere called Gryffindor Tower.

Severus was trailed from behind by an anxious, guilty-looking Luna, and that told the whole tale.

"Draco," Severus said immediately, eyes falling upon Draco's location half-draped over Harry with his typical distaste. "Might you spare a moment to speak with your godfather?" His tone was entirely ironic, and Draco knew he was in for it.

"Of course, sir," Draco said quickly, scrambling off Harry and over to Severus, who led him out into the hallway. Luna did not follow, though she looked tempted. Draco resisted the urge to shoot daggers at her on his way out, because he had wounded her to the quick, he knew, and he was sure she thought she had done the right thing.

"Your cousin Miss Lovegood," Severus informed him in a low voice, "Has come to my dungeons with a very interesting tale to tell."

It shouldn't have been a surprise, really, that Luna went to the adults. The only curious thing was that she had gone to Severus, and not Sirius and Remus. Perhaps she thought Severus more capable of decisive action to stop them, or maybe she just felt it less of a betrayal.

"Has she," Draco stalled, shifting uncomfortably before Severus turned on him darkly.

"She says, for one, that you have taken the Liquid Fiendfyre I gave her years ago," Severus said in a rush. "Are you stocking up? Or may I ask what has happened to my godson's in the interim, that he need take his cousin's?"

I used it in the Chamber of Secrets was hardly an answer he could give. "I just wanted two," Draco lied, and Severus rolled his eyes.

"Very well. If you speak the truth, there is an easy way to prove it," Severus said impatiently. "Show me both." When Draco froze rather than produce the goods, Severus snorted contemptuously. "As I thought. Your secrets have truly amassed a mountain, have they not?"

"I never meant for it to be this way," Draco said softly, believing he was telling the truth. "It's just all... piled up, that's all. But I didn't mean it to. And if Luna's told you- other things-"

"She told me you plan to take Potter, Weasley, and Granger," Severus filled in, "And leave the safety of Xaphan. Today. For prospects unknown."

There was no way Draco could hide his reaction. Not from Severus. They were well and truly busted. "Are you going to tell Sirius and Remus?" *But I've already written them a letter* was on his lips as a truly nonsensical rejoinder.

"And here," Severus said silkily, "I had anticipated my deceptive godson would at least attempt to provide the appearance of explaining *why.*"

"Dumbledore," Draco said immediately, the hope of reasoning with Severus coming to him at last, in a way he perhaps should have tried with Luna. "It's Dumbledore. He's given Harry something to do. Something secret."

"I am aware," Severus sighed, "That Albus shared information with Potter that he did not see fit to give to anyone else. I take it that information has made it to you in turn, through your... privileged access."

"We have to follow the path Dumbledore gave Harry," Draco pleaded, feeling it all on the verge of collapsing, "And we can't do it here, around everyone else. Dumbledore trusted it to Harry alone."

"So mysterious," Severus said dryly. "You have developed a rare talent for that. And it was vital that Potter maintain this high level of secrecy." Draco nodded. "And you view this mission as important enough to throw yourselves into danger, and-"

"Of course I do," Draco interrupted, despite Severus's displeasure at him doing so. "It's not some trifling thing, Severus. It's *everything.* If we fail, the wizarding world falls."

"You hold a great deal of faith in the instructions of Dumbledore," Severus observed keenly, "For one who sparred so bitterly with the man, and personally uncovered information about his connections to Grindelwald." Now was perhaps not the time to remind Severus that connections to Grindelwald would be a hypocritical thing for Draco to despise in others. "Used that information for blackmail, in fact. And now you hold the fate of the world to lie in your *obedience* to Dumbledore."

Trust Severus to always cut to the heart of Draco's inconsistencies. In truth, Draco was sure he *wouldn't* be so passionate about following Dumbledore's guidance, if not for the foreknowledge from the blue loop. "It's like I told Scrimgeour, before he met his maker," Draco said, forcing himself to meet Severus's gaze levelly. "I had personal squabbles with Dumbledore, yes. But if there was anyone who understood what it would take to defeat the Dark Lord, it was Dumbledore. Or don't you agree?"

Severus didn't dispute that, just eyed Draco with a disquieting look like he still knew more than Draco, however it seemed to the contrary. "And if Dumbledore turns out not to have been the man you thought him to be? If the cost for fighting his fight turns out to be more than you can bear?"

Some flicker of déjà vu went through Draco then, perhaps to older talks with Dumbledore, but he ignored it out of straightforward conviction. "Whatever the cost," Draco pledged, "I'll pay it and then some. I'm not afraid."

"Such a Gryffindor now, my godson," Severus mused facetiously. "Perhaps Dumbledore was not wrong to give you the Sword of Gryffindor, if this is your headstrong attitude now towards the future of yourself and those dear to you."

"I'm not, though, I'm a Ravenclaw," Draco said reflexively, and then, from a deeper place in him: "Severus, if you're still a Slytherin, then- we're the same. I think where it counts, I'm still a Slytherin too. Even after all this time. I am a Slytherin."

Severus gazed at him for a long time, impassive, before speaking. "And your guardians? Have you any plan to placate them when your absence becomes known?"

Draco fished in his pocket and pulled out the letter, to show it to Severus. "I've written them... not much different from what I've told you, I think. Maybe... maybe you could leave it for them to find, once we're gone?"

"You speak as if I condone this plan of yours."

"Don't you? Did anyone believe in Dumbledore more than you?" Draco said hopefully, and then threw aside caution, and breathed, "Thank you," and darted forward and hugged Severus tightly around the middle. "I'll miss you, Severus."

Severus allowed the embrace for an unusually long time before he shook Draco off with his customary show of contempt. "If Dumbledore believed it was necessary, then yes, it must be done. I will speak to your cousin and help her understand. You... you must promise me, Draco, that you will be unbelievably *careful*."

Draco nodded intently and stared at Severus, unable to believe his luck. Severus was actually going along with this and letting them?

"I hope, with Miss Granger present," Severus sighed, "One need not worry at least about this juvenile mission being adequately supplied."

"No," Draco laughed, relieved. "No. That's one thing you don't have to worry about with Hermione."

"*Careful*," Severus said again suddenly, gripping onto his arm hard. "Take care with *yourself*, Draco. You are not something to be easily sacrificed."

"I understand," Draco said, trying to fight back his own ironic laugh, because that was exactly what he was meant to be, a sacrifice, and for Severus, but not yet. That was the one saving grace. Not yet. He kept it from his mind when he could, and he'd been successful in the rush of planning, especially when he could be with Harry. It still hovered always at the borders of his consciousness: whatever you do now, Draco Black, it will be among the last things you ever do, so choose carefully.

And Draco had chosen, and knew it was the path they needed to take, in order to leave the world safe for his nine names once he was gone.

"I can't believe we're really doing this," Ron said, sounding somewhere between giddy and terrified, and Luna crossed her arms and regarded him with uncharacteristic dourness.

"I can't believe you're really doing this either," Luna said glumly. "But if Professor Snape thinks it's the right thing, what can I do?"

She could have gone to Sirius and Remus, for one, or any of the other adults hanging around Xaphan- one could only imagine Gilderoy's response to such a prospect of abandonment- but she seemed to have lost her will to do any more telling on Draco, once her one attempt had not turned out as she imagined. She was instead slumped in a pack with them in the Gryffindor common room, all of the four holding satchels with Hermione's the one with near-infinite contents.

"I'm sorry, Luna," said Harry, squaring his jaw in determination and doing his hero thing to excellence. "We're doing what we have to. I hope in time, you'll understand that. It will be a comfort to know you're here at Xaphan-"

"Under the protection of the adults, you mean," Luna said with a sigh, and Draco seized her by the shoulders.

"To give them protection, too," Draco said insistently, and meant it. "Everyone acts like this is some impregnable fortress, but it's not. If Xaphan falls, you have to fight. And you have to protect Remus and Sirius and Severus for me- they're all liable in their own ways to stupid self-endangerment-"

"If Xaphan falls," Luna said, chewing on her lower lip with a fearful expression, "How will you know?"

"You can write us a message," Hermione said, holding up her Protean coin. "We're still Dumbledore's Army, remember? And Harry is keeping his two-way mirror from Sirius for emergencies on our end too. So you don't need to worry about keeping in touch."

"You're not bringing your owls?" Luna said, looking around, and Ron nodded.

"No use in having them," Ron sighed. "Just another way for us to be tracked if we use them."

"I'll try and make sure Hedwig and Pigwidgeon are looked after properly," Luna offered, and Draco enfolded her in an unexpected hug from behind. She shrieked happily, almost sounding like herself again.

"Our Luna-Luna is our agent at Xaphan, see," Draco cooed. "I'm so proud of Cousin..."

"I'd still rather go with you," Luna muttered, but when Draco let her go, she had a rueful half-smile.

"Do you want to say goodbye to anyone else?" Hermione asked Ron, no doubt mindful of the other Weasleys present at Xaphan, and Ron shuddered theatrically.

"This is enough. If Mum somehow catches wind before we're well off and truly escaped..."

Draco caught Harry's gaze as Ron launched into a frightfully accurate impression of his mother gone into a rage, prompting them all to laugh, even Luna. Harry gazed back at him with a steadiness at odds with his shakenness before after his dream. Seemed Harry too was past his trepidation, and ready to begin.

"Let's go," Draco said, although he too had goodbyes he felt guilty not providing, a list starting with Gilderoy and Dobby that included, surprisingly enough, Ginny. "We don't know when Severus is going to leave out my letter, or when they're going to find it. We have to be gone before they realize what we're going to do."

"Okay," said Luna in a voice like she was trying to be brave, in the face of abandonment. She darted forward and gave him one more hug, clinging to his arm as if she could tag along with his Apparition. "Good luck, everyone."

"Take care, Luna," Draco said, gently extricated himself from her grasp, then took Hermione's hand, and together, the four of them with their things Apparated away from Xaphan.

They ended up in Grimmauld as planned, one final step in truth before their full emergence from the Order's cocoon of safety. Hermione wanted to check its library for anything useful, although from the sound of things, the book Dumbledore had left her seemed the most likely to bear fruit for them. They settled into the familiar surroundings with the tacit agreement they would not be settled there long, although where they intended to spend the night, they

had not yet said. Draco had a few ideas, but he wasn't sure how much the others would like them.

If Kreacher was about, they didn't see him. If he wanted to pop over to Xaphan and bust them, of course, he was eminently capable of doing so without orders. Lucky the last thing he was likely to do was to help out Sirius.

Draco ended up in his room playing with the dragon necklaces on the wall, thinking of when his mother had given them to him. There was his chipped Hungarian Horntail from the night they had gone to the graveyard and Voldemort had risen again. There was the Antipodean Opaleye, which he had used to wear all the time, and traded for his HJP pendant. The Opaleye was like his Patronus, and reminded him of Dantanian Noir. He remembered seeing Dantanian after killing Theo, and pushed away the memory forcibly. He could only hope that was a slip of the mind and nothing more, a fluke of his own distortion that would never happen again.

In the end he left his necklaces and only packed another gift of hers, a cashmere sweater, along with some more winter clothes he hadn't had at Xaphan. He took a Polaroid or two off the wall, and said goodbye to his stationary Ian Wright poster, wishing Arsenal a successful season when he would be unable to follow it this fall. Then he wandered off to help Hermione sorting through Grimmauld's books, only to grow bored and wander further afield.

He ended up with his steps taking him unerringly to the family tapestry as they always did eventually, hand drawn magnetically to his marred surface, to the spots blasted where his parents' names had used to reside. He gazed as his eyes often did between the spot that had once been Draco Malfoy, to the writing now of Draco Black, and then stared back at what had once been Narcissa Malfoy and was no more. If Draco needed something to harden him to their cause, it was this. He had his mother as a reminder of what happened if he failed someone he cared for in the red line. Things for them could worsen. His mother was a Death Eater now, and his enemy...

"Are you alright, dragon?" a beloved voice asked, coming from behind him, before Harry turned him to take him in a full-bodied embrace. Draco yielded to it eagerly, turning to that embodiment of solidity and warmth and letting it remind him of what he was fighting for. "You looked so sad."

"I'm not sad now," Draco said, leaning to steal a kiss, only to get a playful whack to his head from behind.

"Figures you two would be at it," Ron said with a laugh. "Aren't we supposed to be picking this place for anything useful before Sirius and Remus check it and find us?"

"Hey, I have a plan for if that happens," Draco said defensively. "Two plans, actually."

"Right," Harry said confidently. "We speak to them and make them understand, the way you did with Professor Snape." Then he frowned, still not letting go of Draco's waist, and squinted. "Wait, what was the second plan?"

"Ooh, I know that one," Ron said with a smirk. "Run like hell like they're Death Eaters on our tail."

One of Harry's hands left Draco to travel along the tapestry, caught in his own less bitter regret. "There they are, Sirius and Remus," he said, tracing the names lovingly. "*Do* you think they'll understand?"

"They'll have to," Draco sighed, while Harry's hand strayed from Sirius to the name by his side: Regulus.

"Sirius has already lost so much family," Harry said unhappily. "He's told you about his brother Regulus, hasn't he?"

"Some," Draco acknowledged. "I know he used to be a Death Eater-" Ron's head whipped around. "And that he got in too deep and got killed, but Sirius still didn't want me to blast him from the tapestry."

"Sounds like he got what he deserved," Ron said, coming over to study the name. All three of them stared at it, until Harry quietly said,

"Or maybe not." The other two regarded him, perplexed, and Harry lifted his finger to highlight each initial of the name. "Regulus Arcturus Black. R, A, B."

"No," Ron breathed, while Draco's mind reeled at the possibilities. Could they possibly have missed something this obvious until now? "Hermione!" Ron bellowed at the top of his lungs, and Hermione came into the room looking cross.

"What is it now?" she asked irritably, only to catch on to something of the stunned air that reigned in the tapestry room. Harry lifted his hand and repeated the fateful sequence for her.

"No," Hermione said, stunned. "Oh, but Harry, you've lived in his room! Could it really have been right under our noses this whole time?"

"He was a Death Eater," Harry said quickly, "And we know he- fell out with Voldemort somehow, so it matches up. He could be the one who stole the real locket."

"Get out the fake," Ron said urgently. "So we know what we're looking for. Could it be *under this roof*?"

Everything turned up to eleven then, as they raced up the stairs and began to ransack Harry's room with Harry's full cooperation. A copious amount of Snitch-related paraphernalia went flying. Unfortunately, all they mainly accomplished was unsettling Harry's few possessions still there, as all of the Black brothers' old things had been stripped from the rooms to accommodate the new occupants. Nor could they discover anything in the closet, or any secret compartments worth the name. The latter of which Draco would honestly have expected from a onetime Death Eater.

"You know," Hermione said thoughtfully, "If anyone knows the hiding places in this house, it would be Kreacher."

"Kreacher!" Harry yelled, and in the midst of Harry's disheveled room there appeared the most unlovable house elf Draco had ever met. Summoned by one of his family, Kreacher had no choice but to appear, but he could not have looked any less pleased by it. It wasn't exactly like Kreacher was a sight for sore eyes either. Calling him the ugliest house elf Draco had ever seen was putting it mildly. Like some walking half-decaying corpse, he looked something like Bellatrix Lestrange would have looked if the body truly matched the soul.

"Master," Kreacher said, in a raspy tone that substituted 'master' with a very different word. "Master," he said towards Draco, with the same underlying contempt, and then turned towards Ron and Hermione with more ire. "Filthy blood traitor and Mudblood," he spat out, and Draco raised his wand reflexively before Hermione raised her hand between them to forestall a Langlock.

"Kreacher," Draco said, trying to calm his instinctive urge to retaliate, "We've been trying to figure something out, and we need your help. I command you to answer our questions honestly. Do you know anything about your old Master Regulus and an ancient golden locket?"

"It would have looked just like this," Hermione added, producing the fake from her bag, and Kreacher's croaking voice let out a wild howl before he dove for the wall and slammed his head against it. "Kreacher, no!"

"Stop that! What are you doing?" Harry exclaimed, springing forward and trying to seize Kreacher to stop him. "What is it?"

"Kreacher has failed Master Regulus, yes, Kreacher failed him, and now Kreacher must pay..."

"Kreacher, I command you to stop hitting yourself!" Draco exclaimed, waving his arm as his voice took on the tone of authority. "You are ordered to stand here and answer our questions. Is that understood?" Kreacher didn't answer, but he had finally stopped where Harry was holding him back, looking as resentful as could be imagined to have been prevented from wounding himself. "Now, I repeat. Do you know anything about Regulus Arcturus Black and that locket?"

Harry let go of Kreacher, and Kreacher stayed sat there in a heap amidst discarded clothes and papers of Harry's, a small and pathetic sight. "Yes," Kreacher said finally, hands spasming as if pained by the effort not to hurt himself. "Yes, Kreacher knows."

"Well, tell us what you know, then," Ron said impatiently, but Hermione made an admonishing sound.

"No, look how hurt he is!" she cried out, voice overflowing with compassion, and Ron shrugged.

"So he hit his head a couple times-"

"Oh, I don't mean physically, you brute! Look at his face! He's crying!" she lamented, and it was true: of all things, Kreacher's massive bloodshot eyes were spilling over with tears, as if

something about the memory of Regulus and the locket had him at his lowest already. Which was in itself enough to significantly increase Draco's curiosity.

"Kreacher, sit down and take your time," Hermione said sympathetically.

"Kreacher does not need pity from the likes of you," Kreacher spat, and this of all things seemed to give him the strength to speak. "Kreacher will tell Masters about the locket. About Master Regulus, who was a good boy. Master Sirius ran away, good riddance, for he was a bad boy and broke my mistress's heart with his lawless ways. But Master Regulus had proper pride; he knew what was due to the name of Black and the dignity of his pure blood..."

Kreacher could not have been more transformed than he was then, from the collapsed sobbing mess he had been to swelling with pride over Regulus. He went on about Regulus like he was his own son. Draco knew full well house elves were capable of great affections, for humans and other elves alike. It would just never have occurred to him that Kreacher could ever hold one.

"And one day, a year after he had joined, Master Regulus came down to the kitchen to see Kreacher. Master Regulus always liked Kreacher. And Master Regulus said... he said... he said that the Dark Lord required an elf."

Draco took a seat on the floor alongside Ron, caught up by the tale Kreacher was unfurling. Ron shot him a troubled look, but they kept silent as Kreacher rocked back and forth and spoke of Voldemort.

"The Dark Lord did not tell Kreacher what they were to do, but took Kreacher with him to a cave beside the sea. And beyond the cave there was a cavern, and in the cavern was a great, black lake… there was a boat..."

"Like the cave where Dumbledore took you," Draco hissed over to Harry, "Right?" but Hermione put up a finger to her lips. Draco fell silent, watching Harry relive his time in the cave on his face.

"There was a b-basin full of potion on the island. The D-Dark Lord made Kreacher drink it... Kreacher drank, and as he drank, he saw terrible things... Kreacher's insides burned... Kreacher cried for Master Regulus to save him, he cried for his Mistress Black, but the Dark Lord only laughed..."

Harry looked pained by the reminder, perhaps of Dumbledore crumbling under the force of that awful potion. Hermione looked stricken too, though her concern looked for the past victimization of Kreacher, by the most evil man to ever live.

"He made Kreacher drink all the potion... he dropped a locket into the empty basin... he filled it with more potion. And then the Dark Lord sailed away, leaving Kreacher on the island..."

"That was the locket that looks like this one," Draco said to be sure, taking the fake from Hermione and holding it up, and Kreacher nodded.

"Yes, the Dark Lord left the locket and he left Kreacher too. Kreacher needed water, he crawled to the island's edge and he drank from the black lake... and hands, dead hands, came out of the water and dragged Kreacher under the surface..."

"How did you get away?" Harry whispered, and Draco found he too had gone nearly breathless with anticipation.

Kreacher looked up and spoke with a strange shaky pride in his voice. "Master Regulus told Kreacher to come back."

Harry didn't understand at first, so Ron had to remind him of the way house elf magic differed from theirs. "They can Apparate and Disapparate through places we can't, remember?" Draco reminded Harry. "Think of..." He lowered his voice so Kreacher didn't hear. "Think of Dobby taking us through the wards into Nurmengard."

"The house-elf's highest law is his master's bidding. Kreacher was told to come home, so Kreacher came home..."

"Then why," Draco said, breath coming even shorter now, "Did you punish yourself at this memory? How did you fail Regulus Black?" Hermione shot Draco a nasty look, and Kreacher looked close to tears and perhaps self-harm again. "Tell us, and I forbid you to try and punish yourself for it."

"Master Regulus was very worried, very worried when Kreacher came back," Kreacher told him obediently, though his eyes spoke volumes what a torment it was to remember. "Master Regulus told Kreacher to stay hidden, and not to leave the house. And then... it was a little while later... Master Regulus came to find Kreacher in his cupboard one night, and Master Regulus was strange, not as he usually was, disturbed in his mind, Kreacher could tell... and he asked Kreacher to take him to the cave, the cave where Kreacher had gone with the Dark Lord..."

They listened to the rest of Kreacher's sorrowful tale in silence: their arrival in the horrible cave, Regulus's orders to switch the lockets after Regulus drank the potion, and Regulus's demise at the hands of the Inferi, which had tears again escaping Kreacher's aged eyes. Hermione's eyes welled up at Kreacher's rendition of Regulus's death, which sounded like to the death of a beloved family member to him. She tried to embrace Kreacher in consolation, but Draco quickly stepped between them.

"He won't want you to touch him, Striker," Draco said shortly, searching for the place in himself that felt for Kreacher too and finding it absent. Maybe Kreacher had finally done something good in his life for once, taking the Horcrux out of the Dark Lord's clutches, but even that had only been by orders. If he had loved Regulus and Regulus had died before his eyes- well, Draco knew what that felt like. He'd dealt a blow like that with his own hands, and watched the light fade from beloved eyes. What Kreacher spoke of in comparison all seemed so long ago and far away.

"So you brought the locket home," Harry prompted Kreacher to continue. "And you tried to destroy it?"

Kreacher had failed, of course, to destroy the indestructible Horcrux, having failed to have any Basilisk fangs handy. And it seemed his failure had been compounded by his inability to tell his mistress what had happened to his Master Regulus, because Regulus's orders had forbidden he ever speak of the cave. Kreacher finished his tale and dissolved into the same utter mourning that Hermione joined with her tender good heart, while Ron went over and put a comforting arm around her. Draco did the same to Harry.

Draco waited until it didn't seem too indelicate to broach the matter. "And the locket, Kreacher... what *did* you do with it, since you couldn't destroy it?"

"Kreacher left it alone. What else could Kreacher do?" Kreacher said, sounding almost defiant in his grief. "Kreacher left it with the other old House Black heirlooms, yes, where it belonged, the great and ancient holdings of our great and ancient house..."

"And where is it now?" Harry asked, excitement getting the best of all of their patience now. "Who has the locket, Kreacher?"

Kreacher glanced around the room at all of them, clearly not wanting to tell them. His thin jaw set stubbornly. "Answer him," Draco ordered. "Kreacher, who has the locket?"

It was with reluctance but also a certain smugness that Kreacher delivered his unexpected answer. "Master Draco. It is Master Draco who holds the locket of Master Regulus."

Draco blinked rapidly, only to be faced with three shocked, borderline accusatory stares. "I don't understand," Draco said blankly. "Except- no, wait. The heirlooms of House Black, you said. I did take a lot of those, when we were cleaning that summer. The summer before last. Sirius wanted to throw them all away, but I wouldn't. I used them to make Sirius and Remus's engagement rings. Maybe I think I took the locket to try and use for them- or..."

"If you're about to tell us you left your supplies for them at Hogwarts..." Ron groaned, throwing his arms up in despair, but Draco just squinted.

"Kreacher, do you know where the locket is?" Harry asked, and Kreacher wiped at his tear-sodden face sullenly.

"Yes. Kreacher knows. The locket is over there." Kreacher reluctantly gestured out the door and across the hall at Draco's room. "Master Regulus's locket is in Master Draco's closet."

Olympia par Manet

Draco's room looked no different than it had an hour ago: silver and blue, lavishly appointed, the bedroom of a well-favored child, without anything more sinister in it than its possible visitors. But now they knew there was something lurking there, and Draco led the rush to his own closet with mixed embarrassment and trepidation. It was entirely possible Kreacher was just having them on for some bitter amusement of his own. The thought was almost preferable to the idea that all this time, Draco had been in possession of a piece of the soul of the Dark Lord without knowing it. In his *closet.*

Draco hastily moved aside the defaced Antipodean Opaleye painting, not wanting to look at the words Theo's knife had left carved across it. Then there it was, at the bottom and back of Draco's closet: a black sack full of House Black heirlooms, from jewelry to antique china that he had salvaged from the destructive fury of Sirius towards his childhood. Somewhere in that sack, according to Kreacher, was the first Horcrux they were searching for.

Ron wasted little time seizing the sack and pouring it over the floor of Draco's bedroom. "Careful, Ron!" Hermione exclaimed.

"What is the locket going to do if we drop it? Grow fangs?" Ron said impatiently. He and Harry bent down and started to go through the piles of pureblood rubbish that Draco had forgotten existed until now.

Draco lingered at the side, mending a plate Ron had shattered, only to drop the plate and shatter it again when Harry let out an abrupt cry. "Look- I think-" Harry called, and held up for inspection with unsteady hands the object in question. Ron snatched it away for inspection, then Hermione, and finally, Draco held the locket in his hands.

Honestly, it looked like something Draco might have worn. It was lucky the thing wasn't openable, or Draco might have taken a fancy to it and started sporting it around Hogwarts in fifth year. An emblem for the Kingsnakes. Emeralds formed a distinctive green S for Slytherin over the rounded front of it, with a weight disproportionate to its size seeming to possess it. It was less a locket than a glorified pendant without the glinting ends being permeable.

Draco could only shudder to think what might be spirited away in that tiny space inside it. Somehow, he doubted it would be someone's photograph.

He handed it back over to Harry and felt the weight off his hands as a surprising relief, as if the mere holding of the thing had been a threat to him. Kreacher had gone off somewhere to lick his metaphorical wounds, so it was the four of them gathered then around the deceptively small-looking object in Harry's hands, under Harry's custodianship for the moment. "What do you think? Is this it?"

Hermione fished out the fake locket and compared the two. "Yes, it's the locket," she said, with misgiving evident on her face, as she stared at the thing between the four of them like some ticking time bomb.

"Um," Draco said, and cleared his throat. "Listen, everyone, I'm, ah, really sorry about this. I'm sorry I didn't remember I had this thing, when we knew we were looking for a locket. Finding it in my closet is-"

"Oh, don't try and sweep this under the rug," Ron said, with a shaky kind of gleefulness. He turned his voice to an imitation of Kreacher's croaking. "'The locket is in Master Draco's closet.' If you think I'm ever letting you forget this-"

"There will be time for joking and teasing," Hermione said primly, "When this awful thing is destroyed."

"Do we know how to do that?" asked Ron, and Harry shook his head.

"What are we to do with it until we figure it out?" Harry asked, turning it over in his hand.

"Be careful with it," Draco said, heart going to his throat. "Be very, very careful."

They gathered in the living room of Grimmauld Place with the locket hanging around Harry's neck, concealed from sight beneath his shirt. Draco knew they had made the right decision to leave Xaphan for this mission, for sure now. They had found something already, and they had to keep it away from anyone else's hands, no matter how friendly and trusted, until they could find a way to break it for good and take away the evil in it. And that meant likewise that their stay at Grimmauld had to be over.

"Where are we going?" Ron asked blankly. Draco peered at the three of them, wondering how they would take his initiative.

"I have an idea," Draco said guardedly. "Let me check it out first before we all go." And to the sound of the other three's protestations, he Apparated out of Grimmauld. Where he went, he wasn't entirely certain, not the way he usually was when he Apparated. He hadn't actually been here before, as it was, except in his mind. The talon wand, though, still led him true.

The sea cliffs appeared before his gaze, white and massive and holding the marks of age, the sound of the ocean filling his ears. A breeze up from the waters carried the scent of salt to him, with the bluffs bearing no other scent, no sign of human inhabitation. The bluffs cut off abruptly to hurtle down to the sea, a nearly vertical drop that had Draco's chest flinching even without a fear of heights, when first arriving there. He wrapped his fingers around the talon wand in his pocket and thanked it for guiding him. "You're welcome, Draco," he said to himself in a slightly altered voice, speaking for Dantanian.

He squinted, trying to remember where exactly in the sea cliffs the entrance had been, but he knew he shouldn't keep the others waiting. He Apparated back to Grimmauld, out of the wind for a moment, suffering their indignation before offering to Side-Along them all to the place he had gone without them. Harry took his arm first, then Ron and Hermione followed, skepticism on their faces. Draco gave them all a cocky smirk before taking them there.

Hermione let out a shocked noise, stumbling backwards from the sheer drop so near them, and Ron caught her by the elbows, grabbing onto her as much for his own balance as hers. Harry seized Draco after their arrival, making Draco shoot him a roguish smile from the side, enjoying the effect he'd had on the intrepid Gryffindors for once. "What is this place? Are you trying to send us all plummeting to our untimely deaths?" Ron complained breathlessly, and Draco turned his toothy smile on him.

"No, I've found us the perfect place to hide," Draco explained, and when none of them seemed to recognize it at once as he had, he let go of Harry and strolled across the overlook, looking around to jog his memory. "Just a moment. I think it's nearby."

Finally, Draco's gaze caught on a separate, taller cliff beside theirs, intersecting it with the rough battle of stone against stone from over the ages that made it a jagged, diagonal meeting. He remembered this. He led them over towards the junction and felt at the imperfections in the stone. When he found a hole in it, he withdrew the talon wand and pressed it into the center.

"Olympius par Manet." No reaction. "Olympius par Manet," he tried, touching another stone, and nothing.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked, peering curiously at the stone, and Draco fought his instinctual embarrassment.

"It's a secret passage," Draco explained. "There's a password." At the doubting looks on his friends' faces, he added, "It was Dantanian's. Dantanian Noir."

Their faces remained blank, until Hermione reacted, rearing back in astonishment. "Right! From the Pensieve memories! Oh, Draco, you found it! The moonstones! Ron, Harry, do you remember when Dantanian Noir took Lamia Periander to see the moonstones?" They didn't seem to, so Hermione went on. "He wanted her to have a nest egg to fall back on if she needed it, so he showed her a cave he'd hidden away on a cliff in the middle of nowhere, where he'd hoarded all these moonstones he'd stolen from Xaphan. Open it, please, Frankenstein!"

Draco smiled at the nickname. It felt apropos at the moment, if he could fulfill his promise. "Olympius par Manet," he said, chewing on his lower lip. "That was the password, right? A painting that Dantanian's mother liked-"

Olympia, a soft voice whispered in Draco's head. *Olympia par Manet.*

"What?" Draco said, turning his head, and the others frowned at him.

"We didn't say anything," said Ron, and Draco realized the voice hadn't sounded like any of the Gryffindors. He frowned, wondering if he was imagining things, and brought down his wand upon the hollow in the stone again.

"Maybe I had it wrong," Draco said casually, "*Olympia* par Manet," and the stone opened, the area before the talon wand going suddenly from white stone to a dark passage.

He let out a low whistle of astonishment at his own feat, while Hermione leaped forward and hugged him, and Harry and Ron looked impressed but wary. "Are you sure that's what we should be doing?" Ron said in the hush that followed, only the sound of the sea breeze whipping at them so far from civilization. "Following in the footsteps of Dantanian Noir?"

"Well, if we checked Grimmauld, we should check here," Hermione said logically. "Oh, Draco, I wonder if he's left any of his materials! We looked all over Xaphan, and I know some of his notes were burned, but just imagine if there's something here!"

There was a torch leaning by the entrance that Draco picked up, offering to Harry. "Incendio," Harry cast, setting the end alight, and then led the way inside Dantanian Noir's lair.

There were more torches along the short passage, enough for each of them to take and light one. Harry made a low noise of astonishment each time another light went on, which Draco didn't understand until Harry had stepped through the end of the stone passage and they could all see what he had been seeing.

"Well, there's something here, that's for sure," Ron said, letting out a low whistle at the sight of the moonstones. The hoard was in a great pile of them, stretched almost to the limits of each side of the cavern.

"True moonstones," said Hermione reverently. "Like we found in the secret room in the observatory at Xaphan. They're impregnated with thousands of nights of moonlight each. He must have taken these from there, to hold as his own."

Harry deposited his torch in one of the hangers on the cave wall, then picked up a moonstone, the size of a Quaffle slightly larger than regulations. Draco held his torch near the opaline mass, and stifled a gasp at the beautiful rivers of white and silver the light sent running through it. Ron cast Lumos then, and it looked like an Antipodean Opaleye had been found slumbering inside Dantanian's cave. All of the moonstones began to positively stream out light.

They all hung their torches on the side walls and picked up moonstones, turning them over in their hands. "Well, if we need to finance a coup, we've struck the jackpot," Ron offered.

"We're not here for the money," Draco said evenly. "We're here for the-"

"Books!" Hermione exclaimed, and dropped her moonstone to race around the pile, towards the small space behind it.

"A place to hide," Draco finished. "Although if Dantanian left any of his notes here, that would be useful too." And the moonstones could be useful, of course, for some forms of dark magic, including ones that he'd seen Dantanian perform in the memories, not that Draco would ever voice that. A part of his mind was still reserved for the whisper he'd heard in his mind, giving him the correct password. He tried to tell himself it had been his own thought and leave it behind. They were inside and that was what mattered.

When Draco picked his way behind the pile to join Hermione, he found just how good a place to hide this really was. Dantanian had carved deeper into the cliff than the memories had shown or Draco had supposed, leaving a great expanse of white stone on three sides. It could either be for people to use as a space, or room for the expansion of the treasure horde. Either way, the moonstones largely blocked it from view, as did the passage and secret entrance that hid it from the outside.

The difficulty, of course, was that it was a bottleneck, with no way of getting out save the one entrance that Draco could see. If this had been a naturally formed cave, maybe there would have been nooks and crannies, but gouged out of the mountainside like this, there were no natural passages. But with a seemingly random location so far from people, that would hopefully not be a problem one way or the other.

"Well, here we are," Draco said finally, after the other two came over and found Hermione scouring the cabinets at the side walls, cabinets that proved to be universally empty, much to her dismay. If Dantanian had ever kept anything in there, it was long gone. "Here it is, our secret cave. A place to figure out how to destroy a Horcrux."

"Not very comfortable, is it?" Ron groused, and Hermione gave him a truly affronted look before rummaging around in her bag and producing four sleeping bags to sit on.

"There we are, Ronald," she said crossly, "So you can be as comfortable here as you like. Perhaps you'd like to take a small nap while the rest of us attend to the business at hand."

Ron made a noncommittal noise and flopped down on one of the bags, which seemed from the look on his face to still not be very comfortable. Hermione took a seat herself and produced *Secrets of the Darkest Art* to examine, while Harry went off to examine the rest of the cave again, and Draco followed him.

"What do you think?" Draco asked Harry, and Harry shrugged.

"It wasn't like any of us had any other idea," he said logically. "Good job, dragon. But..." He stepped closer and pushed the hair out of Draco's eyes, making Draco focus on him in a different way.

"But?" Draco asked, refusing to be distracted.

Harry shrugged again. "I just have a bad feeling about this place. I don't know. It seems like we've come so far already, you know, but we've got so far to go. We have a Horcrux, yes, but if we can't destroy it..."

"We can destroy it," Draco said immediately, surprised by Harry's unusual pessimism and willing it away. "I'll destroy it for you. Don't even worry about it. I swear, I'll destroy it for you tonight."

"Will you?" Harry said, a reluctant smile opening up his face. "And how exactly do you plan to do that?"

"Don't question me," Draco bluffed, trying to hold back his own smile. Harry's fingers had settled semi-permanently in Draco's hair now, making it harder to think straight, but Draco was resolute in appearing strong to Harry for that moment, nonsensical as it was. "Don't you know who I am?"

"Right," said Harry, "I forgot, you're invincible," and Draco pulled him into a kiss that seemed to echo in the near-silent chamber, the sound of their coming together resounding against all the glimmering moonstones. Draco sighed and leaned in closer, letting his arms link around Harry's neck, and felt the reassurance as well as the rush of it, the continued amazement that he could steal kisses like this from Harry Potter. It let him not think about how much time was left to him, time measured in kisses from Harry he could get, or how the word *Olympia* really had sounded in his head as if it had come from someone else.

"So," Hermione said, face flushed with excitement as the other three took a seat around her. "I've been reading *Secrets of the Darkest Art*- yes, Draco, I'll give it to you as soon as I'm done- and I've been researching how to destroy Horcruxes." She held up the well-worn large black tome to them in demonstration, her distaste obvious, while Draco wondered how he could get his hands on it sooner.

"So does it say how to destroy Horcruxes in that book?" Ron asked bluntly, and Draco leaned closer. Here was the point of their entire mission. There would be no use in gathering the Horcruxes to themselves if they couldn't do away with them. Otherwise they'd just be becoming Voldemort's glorified security guards.

"Yes," Hermione said, laying the book down on the pale stone with a sigh, "Because it warns dark wizards how strong they have to make the enchantments on them. From all that I've read, what Harry did to Riddle's diary was one of the few really foolproof ways of destroying a Horcrux."

"And we've already established we're replete with Basilisk fangs," Draco muttered, heart sinking, mind and heart going back as they always did, with the slightest invitation, to the never more aptly named Chamber of Secrets...

"It doesn't have to be a Basilisk fang," Hermione explained. "It has to be something so destructive that the Horcrux can't repair itself. Basilisk venom only has one antidote, and it's incredibly rare-"

"Phoenix tears," nodded Harry.

"Exactly," Hermione said, holding forth as if she was their Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, in a very deep and secret Hogwarts. "Our problem is that there are very few substances as destructive as Basilisk venom, and they're all dangerous to carry around with you. That's a problem we're going to have to solve, though, because ripping, smashing or crushing a Horcrux won't do the trick. You've got to put it beyond magical repair."

"But even if we wreck the thing it lives in," said Ron, "Why can't the bit of soul in it just go and live in something else?" Draco remembered a Horcrux doing just that in the face of liquid

Fiendfyre, in the case of Riddle's diary, when happenstance had left a single page of it remaining elsewhere.

"Because a Horcrux is the complete opposite of a human being," Hermione said, and Ron got the kind of bewildered look he usually reserved for trying to figure out girls. "Look, if I picked up a sword right now, Ron, and ran you through with it, I wouldn't damage your soul at all."

"Which would be a real comfort to me, I'm sure," said Ron. Harry and Draco laughed.

"It should be, actually! But my point is that whatever happens to your body, your soul will survive, untouched. But it's the other way round with a Horcrux. The fragment of soul inside it depends on its container, its enchanted body, for survival. It can't exist without it."

"That diary sort of died when I stabbed it," Harry offered, and Draco took his hand reassuringly. It all seemed hopeful at the moment, as if they could work this out if only they pooled their minds and resources together.

"And once the diary was properly destroyed, the bit of soul trapped in it could no longer exist."

"And Luna was no longer in such danger from it," Draco concluded. "Our problem is just going to be finding a way as destructive as the Basilisk fang to take care of it."

"I wonder how Dumbledore destroyed the ring and the cup?" Harry mused. "Why didn't I ask him? I never really..." Draco could see it on his face, the regret for so many things he wished he had asked and said and had never had the chance. He tightened his grip on Harry's hand. He knew the feeling, unfortunately enough, for himself, when it came to Gellert Grindelwald.

"What about Liquid Fiendfyre?" Hermione offered. "Wasn't that what Professor Snape used to try and destroy Riddle's diary when he was given the task?"

Draco reached into his pocket and withdrew Luna's vial, which would pass as well where it counted with the Gryffindors as his. "This does have to be one of the most destructive things we've got on us. What do you think?"

Harry took the vial and weighed it in his palm. "Isn't it dangerous?"

"Not as dangerous as real Fiendfyre, I would think," Draco weighed in, trying to ignore the way breathing became just a bit more difficult at the mere contemplation of real Fiendfyre. "*That's* too dangerous for us to try and use it, isn't it, Striker?"

"But *Liquid* Fiendfyre," Hermione mused. "Professor Snape had so much time to try and destroy a Horcrux, and if that's what *he* produced for it..."

"It has to be worth a shot," Ron finished for her. "Except it didn't work, though, did it?"

A part of Draco longed to take the Horcrux back to Xaphan and unveil all to Severus right then, begging *he* destroy it, but the need to follow the blue loop was too strong. "We don't know that," Draco said thoughtfully. "The problem was that he didn't have the whole

Horcrux. There was a page elsewhere. If he'd had the entire diary, the way Harry did when he stabbed it with that fang, maybe it would have worked and destroyed the Horcrux."

"And maybe it wouldn't have," Hermione sighed. "But we have to try, don't you think?"

"We do," Harry agreed.

"If this works, we could destroy the Horcrux tonight!" Ron enthused, and Harry pulled the Horcrux out from under his shirt to stare at it ruefully. Then his gaze lifted, lightening when it fell on Draco.

"Tonight, as promised," Harry said softly, just like Draco had claimed to him.

Liquid Fiendfyre might not have been as dangerous as real Fiendfyre, but it was still plenty perilous, enough that it merited considerable preparation. Severus had somehow managed to use it within the confines of Hogwarts without destroying much besides his own fireplace, and as far as Draco knew, the Liquid Fiendfyre he had used in the Chamber of Secrets hadn't followed all the way up to Hogwarts. That meant it was containable, to a certain extent. The question then was just how they meant to contain it.

The answer turned out to be right before their eyes. Walls of moonstones, true moonstones, had the best chance they could muster of containing the fire within their confines. Harry took off the locket with what looked a sigh of relief, laid it on the ground, and they went to work. It took a long time to construct their moonstone edifice for the Fiendfyre, removing stones from the pile and making a little hut around the locket.

It was not so much clear lines and layers as piles, with the way the smooth rounded moonstones slid over one another, but eventually, when Harry's watch said it was far past the arrival of night, they had their structure. The only difficulty would be getting the Liquid Fiendfyre inside it and then trapped without exposing themselves to any of its shock.

Eventually, Draco reached into the hollow center of their structure and placed the Liquid Fiendfyre vial, seething and blue in its confines, right beside the unconcerned-looking locket, lying between it and one of the central moonstones. "This is like a ritual," Harry said with a nervous laugh, having been privy to a ritual using moonstones by Draco at Nurmengard. Draco laughed more assuredly, and flipped his hair out of his eyes.

"It's my ritual," Draco said confidently, though he wasn't sure how much he believed in his own confidence. "I've made it up. Aren't you impressed?"

"Very impressed, dragon," Harry said, rolling his eyes, but gave Draco a kiss on the head anyway.

"Didn't I promise you I'd destroy the Horcrux tonight?" Draco gloated on, and Harry didn't answer, but Draco thought he heard Ron mutter,

"So that's what passes as dirty talk between those two."

Draco did suppose that the relationship configurations between the four of them had turned their Horcrux hunt into the world's longest double date.

"If it is a ritual," Hermione said doubtfully, "Shouldn't we say a few words before we begin?"

"My ritual doesn't need words," Draco said loftily. "Its, er, clarity of purpose speaks for itself."

"Destroy that evil thing," Ron agreed, but they all stood there paralyzed for some time before Draco finally mustered his courage to come forward. They had no idea, after all, what might happen when the locket met Fiendfyre. Maybe it would open and leak out some miasma that would poison them all. Perhaps they were being unspeakably foolhardy. But if it was what Severus had tried with the diary, it had to be worth a shot, Draco told himself, and made the move for them.

A spell shot out from the talon wand shattered the vial of Liquid Fiendfyre right on top of the locket. Draco hastily dropped the moonstones above it in place, closing off the airway, and trusted Liquid Fiendfyre to burn without a steady oxygen supply. With the brief flicker of liquid-looking blue he'd seen before the moonstones intervened, the vial was already burning, and they would just be lucky if it didn't burn right through the moonstones, out into the cave where they all waited, terrified and expectant...

Nothing happened except something beautiful. The moonstones began to radiate the hot light of the flame through their translucent globes, their brilliance turned from silver-white to fire blue. Hermione seized onto Draco's arm at first sight of it, thinking it was the flame piercing through and coming out, but it didn't seem to be moving any closer to emerging from its cocoon. It was just palpitating inside the stones, setting a glow about the cave that reminded Draco of Patronus-blue, like Dantanian had so loved to spread about a room's ceiling in the form of constellations. One could almost envision constellations projecting from the moonstone cocoon of the Fiendfyre, creation manifesting within the fact of destruction. If it didn't stop being pretty in an instant and kill them all.

A sound began after a few minutes, a crackling like moonstones were being broken and scattered. "Maybe we should put more moonstones on top," said Ron, and with levitation and their hands, the others quickly aided him.

It was an uneasy sleep, with the Sneakoscope out to alert to any hostile activity as they rested. Draco scooted his sleeping bag over right beside Harry's, thinking with a smile of their sleeping bags in third year when the whole castle had slept in the Great Hall for fear of Sirius. Harry had been so intent on sleeping beside Draco then, and now he could have his wish. It was all Draco could do to keep himself from testing the strength of the sleeping bags by trying to climb into Harry's with him. Such thoughts helped distract from wondering if the fire would slip its confines mere meters away from them.

They could tell the fire had gone out the next morning because the crackling sounds of moonstones fragmenting had ceased. They ate the rest of the food they had left from

Grimmauld, all sneaking glances over at the pile of moonstones, then Harry rose to his feet, resolute.

"Let's see, then," Harry said brusquely, and removed the top moonstones from the structure. He let out a groan then that might have alerted the others to what he saw, before they too leaned in and caught sight of what faced them.

The innermost moonstones were indeed cracked, blackened and hollowed-out in a way that looked ruined. Fragments were scattered over the intact moonstones outside them, an eerie juxtaposition of the complete moonstones' serene beauty and the wreckage left by the Liquid Fiendfyre since gone out. But there was no sign of wreckage there with the locket, which lay amongst broken moonstones looking as gleaming and pristine as it had straight from Draco's closet.

"Let me see," said Draco, snatching up the thing from below Harry, and Ron peered down at it in his palm with desperate optimism.

"Maybe it's been destroyed?" Ron said weakly, poking at it. Draco cursed the smooth emerald S that taunted them, completely undamaged even with so many true moonstones around it showing the force and fury of the fire.

"Does it look destroyed to you?" Harry asked, and tried to pry at it. "It still won't even open. Nothing's changed." He handed it over to an ashen-faced Hermione, who inspected every inch of it, looking hopeful for some sign of magical damage, but clearly finding nothing to justify her vain hope.

"I'm sorry," Draco said finally, letting out the words he'd already had in his mind since they uncovered the locket. "I'm sorry I was wrong. The Liquid Fiendfyre didn't work. And now we've wasted it."

"It was worth a try, Draco," Harry said loyally, leaning over and patting his shoulder, and Hermione did the same.

"Cor," Ron breathed, looking over the swath of destroyed moonstone beneath them. "If that didn't wreck this thing, what on Earth could?"

"That's what we'll have to find out," Hermione said with full determination, picking her way to her feet with a show of cheerfulness. "It's what we're here for, isn't it?"

"To do the impossible?" Draco said weakly, trying to smile at her.

"To put an end to You-Know-Who, once and for all," Ron said grimly. "He couldn't have made it easy for us, could he?"

"If anyone can figure out how to do this," Harry said, "It's you and Hermione, Draco." At Ron's indignant noise, Harry quickly added, "And I'm sure Ron will be very helpful too."

Suddenly, in the companionable silence that arose around the disappointed bunch, there was a distinct whirring sound, as the Sneakoscope Hermione had set out lit up and began to spin.

"Look!" Ron hissed, gone to whispering immediately, his wand flying out. "Look! Do you think there's someone out there?"

"They can't get in unless they know the password, right?" Harry said anxiously, and grabbed the locket off the floor protectively. He put it back around his neck and under his shirt as if readying himself for battle. Hermione, for one, snatched up the Sneakoscope and put it in her bag, after it had rendered them what might indeed be good service.

"We don't know it's someone unfriendly," Hermione said in a quivering voice, although she had her wand out as well. "It could be Sirius and Remus, come to drag us back to Xaphan for our own stupidity."

"Or," Draco said flatly, "It could be Death Eaters. But how could they find us so quickly?"

"Come on," Harry said, and led them out from behind the moonstone pile. They advanced around the moonstones and out to the secret passage, where their torches still lit the way. Draco had his heart in his throat beating double-time. He told himself it could just be their friends come to track them down, but somehow it felt unlikely. The talon wand was vibrating in his hand, a heat he didn't think he was imagining there, as if readying itself to kill.

"We have two choices," Draco cautioned them, catching them all at the front of the passage, near the password-guarded entrance. "We can go out and face them. Or we can just go back to Grimmauld and hope they don't have some way to follow us."

"I say we go back to Grimmauld," Ron whispered. "If it is our friends, they can follow us there. If it's not..."

Draco put his hand in the center. "Let's go back to Grimmauld," he said, and raised his wand. In a moment, the others did the same. So Draco Apparated out of the cave to Grimmauld Place, none the wiser as to who had set off the Sneakoscope.

Or at least it should have been, but Draco's attempt at Apparition fizzled out into nothing, as did the others'. "Is it just me sucking at Apparition, or can we not Apparate out of here?" Ron asked, and Draco tried again. Nothing.

"Dantanian must have put up Anti-Apparition wards here," Draco said suddenly, realizing, "To keep anyone from Apparating in past his secret entrance," and felt like a fool.

"And they're still intact after this long?" Harry marveled.

"It's *Dantanian*," Draco hissed, feeling that to be self-explanatory, and turned towards the entrance with reluctant determination. "Looks like we'll be finding out who's out there after all."

"Draco," Hermione said, gripping onto his elbow, "We can't let Harry be taken with the Horcrux. We *can't.*" Draco nodded, and stepped up to the secret entrance from their location inside.

"Olympia par Manet," Draco said, pressing his wand to the stone, and opened the door.

The moment he extended his head out of their hiding place, red light flew at him from several angles. Draco cast Protego Horribilis without a word, on only pure instinct, saving him from being caught. The massive shield held against the curses, shielding himself and the others behind him from the onslaught. On instinct again, Draco darted forward out of the entrance, unwilling to remain unable to see who they were fighting.

The sight of long dark robes blowing in the sea wind told him instantly. It was Death Eaters, with one whose long dark wavy hair flew in the air too from the breeze. She was the one at front, with her wand leveled right in Draco's direction. She was beautiful and terrible as Draco had remembered, the one he feared the most in the world. The enemy, with Bellatrix Lestrange leading them.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione tumbled out of the cave, only to struggle backwards against the cliff face with the curses that flew at them too, narrowly dodging the red lights. "ALIVE!" Bellatrix howled, making Draco's blood turn to ice. "Remember! The Malfoy boy, alive! Potter, alive!" She shot out a curse that made Hermione shriek and throw herself to the ground, running towards Draco where he was backing from the cliffside, not wanting to be near the sheer drop. They were completely exposed where they stood, there for the picking off by Death Eaters.

"The blood traitor, dead! The Mudblood, dead!"

"Get behind me!" Draco screamed, pulling Hermione up and to her feet, where she stumbled up to grab at his back. "Ron! They want you *killed*!" Ron was further behind, shooting a Stunning curse back at the Death Eaters, who evaded it with ease and laughter. "HARRY!"

Harry flew to Draco's side, running with the four of them towards solid ground, where they no longer had the cliff face to their back pinning them. The Death Eaters ran in pursuit, the ground shattering behind the four of them where the curses hit just in their wake. A vision went through Draco's head of the duel he'd lost one-on-one with Sirius just days ago, and he had to push it away, to focus on running...

"Protego Diabolica," Ron gasped out to Draco, and Draco whirled around.

"There's no time!" he screamed. "Sectumsempra!" Bellatrix was the one leaping backwards now, a gouge left in the stone between them, and Draco could get a look at the party that faced them. There were surprisingly few figures there, but Draco could barely bring himself to count when he saw one of the Death Eaters behind Bellatrix had long flowing white blond hair. He would know his father anywhere, even though the gleam of the artificial hand he had worn the last time they faced each other was missing.

Bellatrix must have found them through Dantanian... must have known this place through her time with him, having the talon wand... but how had she known they were here *today*... how had she known they were *inside*...

There was nowhere truly to run, not in the harshly brilliant seaside sunlight, as Bellatrix stepped forward to engage Draco, while Father went after Harry with a single-minded fury. But they were not striking to kill, not the way the other Death Eaters were as they pursued Hermione and Ron once the knot of the four was shattered and separated, Hermione and Ron

darting in one direction and Harry and Draco in another. Hermione and Ron had on their tail... was that the Lestranges, Rodolphus and Rabastan there, cackling like their deranged leader as they sought the death of the teenagers they pursued...

Letting Draco's focus shake from Bellatrix for so much as a second was a deadly mistake. She caught him on the side with a cutting curse and pain exploded through him, driving him to his knees. He saw red and felt a burning ache on his side, before he had worse in his face, the enemy suddenly right before him.

Bellatrix darted at him and grabbed him by the chin, forcing his gaze up. "How did you do it?" she exclaimed, and shoved her wand beneath his chin, her other hand going to grip his side where the blood dripped out, making Draco scream in agony at the white-hot pain that spread through him. "How did you do it, you little blood traitor cunt? How did you kill him?"

The bottom dropped out from beneath Draco, even as he shot out a panicked Repulso to drive Bellatrix away from him. It didn't connect, and Bellatrix's wand remained in place. "How did you kill Theodore Nott?" Bellatrix bellowed, and Draco realized two things at the same time. One, that the others were close enough that they could probably hear. Two, that Draco knew the wand that Bellatrix had pinned against his skin. He knew it all too well. He'd hallucinated it, in manic bursts of guilt, the talon wand becoming it. And now it was in the hands of Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Repulso!" Draco cast again, trembling, but his hand was shaking so much, whether from pain or Bellatrix's words, the talon wand fell from between his fingers. The curse flew awry and hit Harry, sending him flying where he was trading blows with Father. He couldn't see, though, not when Bellatrix used her new wand to guide his gaze back to hers.

"I knew you killed him!" Bellatrix exulted in a dark kind of triumph. "*I knew you killed Theo*!"

Abruptly, the fighting around them came to a stop, as both Draco's friends and the Death Eaters froze and turned to face Bellatrix's yowling. She seemed to enjoy the look on Harry's face then, something between utter shock and defiant disbelief. "Oh, didn't you know, Potter, didn't you know what your little whore had done? Didn't you know he killed Theodore Nott and burned his body in the Chamber of Secrets?"

"You're a liar!" Harry screamed and ran forward, shooting an Expelliarmus at Bellatrix, who dodged but let go of Draco in the process, the hard wooden end of the wand sliding down over his throat like the blunt end of a knife. Draco dove to the ground, self-preservation instincts working to make him dive for the talon wand and roll away from Bellatrix, only to scream in agony as he gripped at the bloody wound in his side.

"Ask him!" Bellatrix exulted, not frightened one bit of the wall of fire Harry sent at her with his Lacarnum Inflamari. She seemed to revel in it, dancing from foot to foot as she evaded the flames. "Ask him what happened to Theodore Nott! All of us know, Potter! We just don't know how! Was it slow? Did you torture him before you ended him? Answer me, Malfoy! HOW DID YOU KILL MY THEO?"

The Telltale Dagger

Draco had to shut that awful mouth. "Sectumsempra!" he cried, and sent the curse hurtling at Bellatrix through the flames. It didn't quite reach her, just uprooted the grass and stone beneath it, sending debris flying through the air. Some of it flew backwards towards Draco, who could barely get up a shield to save himself from the heavy fragments slamming into his bleeding side.

"Avada Kedavra!" Rodolphus Lestrange cried out, and green light flew at Hermione. Ron tackled her out of the way, both of them rolling away, towards the fire Harry had set. Hermione shrieked as the fire caught at the ends of her long hair before she could stop it, before she hastily put it out with the end of her wand, panting on the ground and bleeding from the face. Ron had a gash at the side of his head, and Draco didn't know how he'd gotten it either, presumably from the fall.

They had to get out of here, now. And not just because Draco couldn't withstand the sound of Bellatrix calling out his crime, the Elder Wand in hand. They were losing, they were all over the place, and Draco felt like he might pass out any second from the blood streaming out of him. If Draco couldn't fight, it was three against four, and then...

Why weren't there more of the enemy, he wondered dazedly as he cast his best Protego Horribilis over Ron and Hermione where they had fallen, not as though that would hold back the Killing curse. Why were there only the four Death Eaters? The odds against them could have been so, so much worse-

The odds were bad enough already. "Harry!" Draco screamed, and held out his hand. Harry ducked and rolled through lines of broken stone and fire, and seized hold of Draco's hand.

"You're hurt!" Harry exclaimed, only to tug them both to the ground to avoid Aruspices Mitte from Rabastan.

"It doesn't matter," Draco managed to gasp out, tasting blood in his mouth, he wasn't sure if it was from his wound or biting himself against the pain, and tried to move as fast as he could towards Ron and Hermione. "We need to run!"

Somehow, Draco managed to land at Hermione's side, where she was standing tall shooting a Stunning curse at the Lestranges. Draco shot one in the same direction, and Rabastan crumbled down to the ground. That was their chance. "We have to Apparate out of here! Where-"

"I know a place!" Hermione cried out, "An arboretum near London," and they all seized Hermione, for her to take them to somewhere safe-

They appeared in a forest Draco had never seen, where it was warmer without the whipping sea wind. The trees stretched high above them, an infinity of trees to Draco's pain-dazed eyes, except there was something wrong.

There were other footsteps.

"Protego Horribilis!" Draco cried, the motion to cast wrenching at his side, and the wave of curses directed at them rebounded off his and Hermione's shields.

The three Death Eaters were right there on their tail, shaded by the tall boughs of the arboretum. Draco tried to dive behind a tree to escape their spells and felt his side explode in agony, making him sink to the ground. He peeled his gaze up and shot an Impedimenta out towards the advancing Death Eaters, but it didn't seem to land. He cursed them with fire instead, a Lacarnum Inflamari that fell short of them but ignited the brush before them. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were diving around the tree with him, trying to shield and trade curse for curse, but Draco feared for their chances with himself so drained and close to passing out. If he lost consciousness from pain, if he got taken out of this battle, then...

"How did they follow us?" Draco groaned. "They didn't catch onto the tail end of our Apparition, did they?"

"I didn't feel it! I don't know!" Hermione cried out in anguish, diving down to the ground again. She had leaves in her scalded hair, clumping there as she rolled over the brush, and Ron tried to shield her only for his shield to break under the pressure of three Stunning spells. They flew over their heads, and Harry shot an Expelliarmus the Death Eaters' way that caught Rodolphus and sent his wand flying towards Draco and his friends-

Only for Bellatrix to wave her wand and capture her husband's wand in hers' gravity, dragging it back to them as if by magnetism. The Elder Wand in her grasp seemed to revel in defying Harry's spell-

"Let's Apparate away!" Ron yelled, seeing the trees between them and their pursuers shrink- the others could have been running, but for how Draco had sank to the ground. Draco was half-tempted to tell them to leave him behind, remembering dazedly back to a wound from a cutting curse like this in Grindelwald's side from Theo. That wound had cut further up to the chest. Had Draco taken the same wound from Theo's mentor? Was he bleeding out even now without realizing it?

"They'll just follow us!" Harry cried out in panic, stepping between Draco and the Death Eaters in an attempt to shield him- only for a Repulso to send him flying back into another tree, a back-breaking sound as Harry slammed into the wood and screamed. Draco's head felt so light now he was amazed he could even lift his wand, let alone make any spells come out of it, but he shot a wave of red sparkling lights at the Death Eaters to blind them- then he reached into his pocket and pulled out the moonstone dagger, throwing it at their blinded enemy into the haze of light-

Bellatrix howled as the dagger struck true, embedding in her side the same place she had cut Draco. Father and Rodolphus stopped attacking at the sound of her injury, heads whipping to their leader in shock. Bellatrix wrenched it right out of her side, making blood spray around her. Draco let out a low hiss of victory, only for Ron to interrupt with a flash of red light at their enemy that Father blocked while Rodolphus scrambled to Bellatrix's side, pulling them behind their own tree now. Father really was fighting with his non-dominant hand. Draco

could see the wand hand was an impotent stump again. Then Father dove backwards with the others, pulling his hideous stump from sight.

"I knew it!" Bellatrix's unnaturally gleeful voice travelled to them from where she had taken cover. There could have been blood in her mouth, and she still would have sounded this triumphant. "I knew you killed my Theo!"

"Stop your lies!" Ron bellowed, panting for breath, while Hermione shoved her hair out of her wild brown eyes, and Harry inched forward, protecting Draco with his body again.

"Lies? Then *why does he have the knife that Theo wielded*?" Bellatrix's pale, bony hand showed it from behind the trees, the moonstone glimmering as a telltale brightness in the filtered sunlight that made it down to the forest floor. "How do you think we found you, little Gryffindors? Did you think I would risk my Theo without tracking him? He had the knife, and Draco took it! Tell me, *how did Malfoy get the knife back*?"

Harry let out a stunned, devastated sound like he'd been punched in the chest by an ally. Hermione let out a shrieking kind of gasp, and Ron shot a Stupefy towards her bared hand before she snatched it and the knife away in time.

"Tell me how you did it, blood traitor! Tell me how you killed my Theo!"

"LACARNUM INFLAMARI!" Harry screamed, and the force of his fireball blew off the top of the tree where the Death Eaters were hiding. The stump and branches went flying, careening into nearby foliage and falling on the Death Eaters like blunt knives.

Father cried out in sheer fury and picked himself out from under the branches, his white-blond hair like a firebrand to draw the eye, just like Draco's must be. "We have to get them!" Father yelled, spurring the other two forward. "If we deliver my son and the Potter boy to the Dark Lord, he will take us back! He must forgive us then! GO!"

"They were tracking us with Draco's dagger!" Hermione exclaimed, seizing onto Harry's side as the Death Eaters threw off the debris over them and raced forward in one swift pack, even Bellatrix streaming blood from her side, the dagger falling from her grasp to bounce down onto the forest floor unnoticed. "They can't track us anymore! We can Apparate away! We need to get Draco to safety!"

Hermione seized onto Draco's shoulder, just the jarring of his wounded side making him scream, before Ron and Hermione grabbed onto her. With the Death Eaters nearly upon them, the four of them Disapparated from the forest to the sound of Bellatrix Lestrange's inhuman howl.

They landed on the floor of Grimmauld, the living room where they had gathered for their ill-fated trip to Dantanian's cave. Draco couldn't hold back another cry of torment, falling onto his back as his head whirled and seemed to flow away from him with the torrent of blood leaving his body still.

"Draco!" Harry cried out, kneeling at his side and seizing his hand in pure terror. "Hermione, what should we do-"

"Oh, if I had my bag," Hermione said, wringing her hands. "There's Essence of Dittany in there- no! Harry!"

Harry Disapparated in an instant, making Ron leap forward as if he could seize him and stop him. Ron landed beside Draco, panting so hard it was like his lungs would give out.

"He can't go to Dantanian's cave! The Death Eaters might have gone back there!" Hermione wailed, and Ron Disapparated, with no doubt as to his destination either. "Don't leave!"

Hermione sat there motionless and speechless for a long moment, then cradled Draco's head with desperation in her eyes. "What are they doing? Should I go after them? What am I doing? Oh, they left one of their own there, they'll be going back for him- Harry! Ron!"

Harry and Ron appeared again in seconds, arms full of the bags they had secured from Dantanian's cave. Hermione lifted one of the bags to whack at Harry, and not gently, either. "What were you thinking!" she screamed, "You fool," and Ron rolled away, ducking out of the way of any blows for his own stupidity. "You could have been killed! Both of you!"

Harry shoved her bag at her instead, nothing but fear for Draco on his handsome, winded, horrified face. "I'm sorry, Hermione, but here it is- help him- no, look, he's going to pass out- Draco, stay with us-"

Hermione was bent over her bag, rummaging frantically, Ron was watching with a stricken face, and Harry was seizing hold of Draco's hand again, before the world faded to blackness.

Draco came back to himself in bits and pieces of whispers. *Going to be fine... has to be... Bellatrix Lestrange said... the moonstone dagger... when You-Know-Who found out Theodore Nott was dead... he and Theo were... can't be true... has to be true... the wound in his side... can't speak for himself... you don't know... even if he did...*

A blink of the eyes, and Draco was lying on the bed in his bedroom, his side bandaged. There was the same onirical Patronus-blue layer of lights around the ceiling, which were the first thing he saw. The second was Harry's face, peering down at him with concern in his deep green eyes behind his glasses. Draco had a momentary terror that something different than care might appear on that beloved face, and couldn't understand why, except-

"Draco, you're awake!" Hermione exclaimed, running over and looking as though she wanted to hug him, but not daring with the state of him.

"Good to have you back with us," Ron said affably, staring at him with relief- and something more complicated that Draco couldn't read on that usually straightforward face.

"The dittany must be working," Hermione said anxiously, checking over Draco's bare side. "It doesn't look like the cut was deep enough to puncture any internal organs, I don't think. You just lost a lot of blood."

"Did one of you levitate me up here?" Draco asked, and Harry nodded, peering at Draco worriedly. Draco longed for Harry to hold his hand, but he wondered with a start if that would ever happen again.

"I heard you all talking," Draco said grimly, struggling to sit up.

"Ssh, Draco, give the dittany time to work," Hermione said hurriedly, trying to ease him back down. "You need rest."

"We can't stay at Grimmauld much longer anyway," Draco said impatiently. "And you're all wondering about what Bellatrix said, I can tell you are. Don't try and hide it from me."

"We can talk about all that later," Ron hedged.

"No, get it over with," Draco said wearily. "You might as well just ask me. I can tell you're all thinking it."

"Draco," Hermione said in a quavering voice, "How did you get that dagger back?"

"Fenrir Greyback had it," Draco said as steadily as he could manage, falling back on his false story with Luna, "And I took it back from him in Ravenclaw Tower."

"Bellatrix Lestrange said Theo Nott had it," Ron said doubtfully, and Draco felt tears come to his eyes, unable to hide what he was feeling even as he tried to lie, because the reckoning had come at last.

"No, it was Fenrir Greyback," Draco said weakly, trying to blink back tears.

"Draco," Harry said quietly, "Just tell us. Did you kill Theodore Nott?"

"I got the knife from Fenrir Greyback!" Draco cried out and buried his face in his hands.

The tears betrayed him as nothing else could have. "Then why are you crying, Draco?" Hermione said gently, and laid a hand on his back. Draco tried not to recoil from it, for how undeserving he knew he was.

"I can't," Draco gasped out into his own palms. "I can't, I can't..."

"Just tell us, Draco," Ron said bravely. "Whatever the truth is, we're with you."

Draco doubted that was as true for the other two, and the thought made him sob harder, feeling Harry and Hermione's wondering eyes on his collapse. He felt his eyes overflow and his nose start to run, truly messy and unappealing now too. "I didn't do it!" he insisted, but he wouldn't have even believed himself. Hermione's hand stayed, stroking at his back, when he feared it might have recoiled.

"Draco, just tell us the truth," Hermione said softly. "It's okay. You killed him, didn't you?"

"Yes!" Draco sobbed out before he could stop himself, lifting his tear-swollen gaze to regard the Gryffindors with a hideous defiance. "Yes, alright, I did! I had to! I had no other choice-

there wasn't any good choices-"

"What happened?" Ron said, reaching over and squeezing his shoulder. Harry sat at a remove, watching them comfort him with an unreadable face.

"You won't believe me," Draco gasped out, "It was too unbelievable," and they just waited, so he tried to get the words out. "He tricked me into- coming to the Chamber of Secrets- that's where I was during the Battle of Hogwarts- Luna's been lying for me- she knows-"

"Luna knows?" Harry asked, a dark note coming to his voice.

"She caught me- saw the blood- there was so much blood-" Draco cleared his throat, tried to stop crying, tried to focus, because it was so simple at root. "He brought the Basilisk you killed, Harry, he brought it back to life and made it attack me, he wanted me dead, he used the old Parkinson house elves Wooky and Nissy, Dobby's friends, to lure me there and then he set the Basilisk on me, but I killed it again and I killed him and Wooky and Nissy too-"

"The house elves?" Hermione said, pulling away from him with an outraged look on her face. "Oh, Draco, house elves don't have a choice but to follow their master's orders, how could you-"

"I didn't mean to!" Draco cried out, missing her reassuring touch on his back already. "I cursed them to get them out of the way and then they were just dead! Serpensmorta. They just couldn't survive it- I never meant- I didn't want to kill Theo- I didn't want any of it- please, you have to understand-"

"If he tried to kill you," Ron said, squeezing his shoulder again, "It was self-defense, Draco. You did what you had to do. With the house elves too, if they were after you... it was all self-defense."

"I had the choice, though," Draco sobbed, feeling a fresh wave of uncontrollable tears rush out of him. "I could have let him live, but I didn't. Because I knew he would never stop coming for me and the people I cared about. I looked him in the eye and cast Sectumsempra and ripped him open."

"How many people have you killed, Draco?" Hermione exclaimed in horror, backing away from him, and part of Draco's heart broke.

"I don't know," Draco whimpered, putting his hands over his face again, and knew what a pathetic spectacle he must make, the murderer losing it in a show of what wasn't even repentance, not really. "I don't know."

"You shouldn't have killed the house elves," Hermione said miserably. "But you said it was a mistake..."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Harry asked, voice coming like a slap to the face, so acutely, painfully attuned Draco was of any hint of how Harry was taking this. It felt like his whole life hung in the balance of whether Harry could still accept him. "I thought-" Harry's voice

broke, and real guilt filled Draco's chest, acid and stifling. "I thought you weren't going to keep any secrets from me anymore."

Draco didn't know how to explain it. "It was too horrible," he said weakly, peering out from between his fingers, and saw Harry had his head in his hands too. "I was too ashamed. I couldn't- I couldn't let you know what a monster I was-"

"You're not a monster," Ron said heatedly, sounding defensive at Draco's own words, and enfolded Draco in a hug. "Of course you're not. Don't say that."

"You should have told me," Harry said, voice and expression unreadable.

"Oh, I wish it wasn't true," Hermione said, wringing her hands together, looking close to tears herself. "It is horrible, it's too horrible..."

"What do you mean?" Ron snapped at her. "Theodore Nott was a *Death Eater*. He took the Dark Mark. Sounds like he was a bloody *necromancer*. He chose his way, didn't he? I've told you, I think he had it coming, no different than Karkaroff or Pettigrew-"

"You were friends, though," Hermione said in amazed incomprehension. "You played Quidditch together."

Draco began to sob harder, harsh wracking sobs that felt like they would tear his body apart, unable to bear her words. It felt like his whole self would be ripped apart. "I know... I know... I know I crossed the line... I know I'm no better than them now... but I had to, I had to, I don't want you all to die..."

"You're different than the Death Eaters," Harry said, but his voice was weighted, still processing what he was seeing and hearing. The lightning bolt scar on his forehead was fully visible, like some reminder that this was Harry Potter, that his unimpeachable goodness stood in such stark contrast to the creature Draco had become. "Of course you are. Don't say that."

"Harry, I'm not *different* from them," Draco gasped. "I'm just on the other side."

"No, Frankenstein. You did the right thing," Ron assured him wholeheartedly, and Hermione came forward again, seizing his hands.

"Oh, Draco," she said softly, with a look in her eyes like something important had just broken for her. "Don't cry."

They left Grimmauld once Draco had stopped crying and his wound seemed fully healed, at least externally. Hermione took them somewhere she didn't think they could be found, a forest where she'd gone camping with her mother and father when she was little. Draco wasn't sure if that reminder of her parents was hurting her, after what she'd had to have Lockhart do to them, but he didn't feel in a position to ask.

Hermione had a tent and full camping supplies in her endless bag. It was a pain to set up even with magic, in the muggy summer heat that clung low to the trees, but Draco assisted without

complaint, feeling Harry's eyes keep sliding over to him as they worked. It felt awkwardly fraught, doing the smallest thing together in cooperation with each other, now that they all knew what Draco was capable of. Draco didn't know how much the others felt it, or how much he was just projecting onto them, but it weighed on him at least.

By the time the sky above them started to darken, they had a campsite together in their small clearing, with a space Hermione had found to set a fire and heat up the food they'd brought from Grimmauld. Before Hermione could begin the heating, though, Draco saw the chance to help with a problem that had been nagging at him for a while, and wasn't his horrible guilt. "Hermione," Draco said, reaching for her, "Your hair's been burned. Will you let me-"

Hermione jerked away immediately, just before Draco could touch her. "Fix your hair," Draco finished, and Hermione let out a shocked breath, skittish as could be at the prospect of Draco close to her. Draco's heart sank, even as he put on a complacent face about it. "Suit yourself, you can handle it," he said affably, while Harry and Ron stared at the two of them silently.

A quiet, apologetic Hermione set about using her wand to cut off the charred end of her long hair. It might have been better done by another person, but no one but Draco was volunteering, and she didn't seem to want Draco near, or to trust him with even that. It was only what Draco could have expected.

Once they were finished eating, Hermione pulled out a newspaper to show them in the firelight. "I asked Kreacher to get this for us while we were waiting at Grimmauld," she said slowly. "I didn't want to show you this, Harry, but I think we all need to know what's going on... now is as good a time as any..."

It was Harry on the front page of the Daily Prophet, a picture of his face that Draco found rather good-looking, despite the circumstances of it: the headline that loomed over the scowling Harry read, Wanted for Questioning about the Death of Albus Dumbledore.

Ron cried out in immediate rage, tossing the paper aside like garbage, before Draco could get a hold of it. Harry was silent, maybe in shock or maybe in disgust, or maybe today was just too much for him to handle, one thing piling onto another for him, including the knowledge that the person at least nominally still his boyfriend was... whatever he thought Draco was now. Seeing his own face linked with Dumbledore's death had to seem almost trivial in comparison.

"I've read the article," Hermione said, taking back the paper from Draco with a regretful look on her face. "It says that Dumbledore disappeared from Hogwarts at the end of the semester, and that no one knows for sure what happened to him, but that Harry and Professor Snape were seen with his body." When Hermione opened the newspaper fold, a singularly malevolent-looking photograph of a bristling Severus greeted them.

"And that's how they twist the truth?" Ron cried out. "When their side knows full well that it was one of their lot to have done it- who left him there for Harry and Snape to find, it had to be-"

"Bellatrix Lestrange," Draco heard himself say, heavy as the name had come to feel on his lips, almost as much of a malediction as the word Voldemort. "It was Bellatrix Lestrange who did it. Or at least struck the killing blow, during the assault on Hogwarts. Because she had his wand. She was using it in the attack on us."

"Bellatrix Lestrange has Professor Dumbledore's wand?" Hermione gasped, hands flying to her mouth, and Draco gave a brief, rueful smile to the image of the implicated Severus before turning to the others with his terrible news to impart.

"You all know the Deathly Hallows by now," Draco said heavily. "You don't need *Tales of Beetle the Bard* to know them. The symbol of Grindelwald. You know that Dumbledore won the Elder Wand from Grindelwald, and wielded it until his death. Now it's Bellatrix who has it, and all of its power."

"Which means You-Know-Who has it," Ron said with a rough exhale. "Doesn't it?"

"Not necessarily," Hermione said uncomfortably. "This is what all of you really need to see: here, look..."

She held out the Prophet to them and Draco experienced the shock of his life: next to the names of Harry, Severus, and himself were the names of Bellatrix Lestrange, Rodolphus Lestrange, Rabastan Lestrange, and Lucius Malfoy and Narcissa Malfoy. Bellatrix's howling portrait had its smaller place by the end of the article. Draco skimmed it intently, finding that the official story linked the death of Dumbledore, with Harry's involvement in the incident, to the intrusion of Hogwarts by "a small contingent of rogue witches and wizards," led by Bellatrix, who had since been driven from its premises. The Ministry of Magic, fallen to the enemy as it supposedly was, was offering sizable rewards not just for the capture of Harry and his friends, but for Bellatrix and her compatriots.

"I don't get it," said Ron. "The Death Eaters have taken over the Ministry, and clearly the Prophet too. Why are they calling for the heads of their own?"

"The Ministry is definitely in the hands of the enemy, though," Hermione said firmly, "Just look, they're calling for a Muggleborn Registry," and Draco was given the familiar announcement about "discoveries" that Muggleborns were "usurpers of magical power," and calls for all Muggleborns to show themselves at a Muggleborn Registration Commission.

The thought that Draco had once supported that side and their cause made him feel more ill than he already did. It took some time for all three of them to read it and Hermione to take it back, with a brusqueness that showed she was masking her own emotions at such a dictum against her.

"This is evil," Harry said fervently, and Draco wished he dared to touch any of the others to comfort them.

"What it is," Draco said, thinking back to Muggle Studies classes on Muggle history, "Is a start. That's how all these things start, labeling and rounding up. It just gets worse from there on."

"It does get worse already," Hermione said, plowing on with exemplary determination, and flipped to another page she'd marked. "Hogwarts is compulsory now, for every young witch and wizard. That was yesterday's news. I don't know if they know about Xaphan opening as a school yet. But even without that, it makes sense. This gives them a way to control everyone even more, taking children. And it takes the Muggleborns out of Hogwarts, since students must be given Blood Status- meaning that they have proven to the Ministry that they are of wizard descent- before they are allowed to attend."

"What else is in here?" Ron asked bleakly. "An edict outlawing ice cream?"

Draco laughed despite himself, and took the paper and turned it over to the back. Hermione snatched it back, looking panicked. "No, don't," she said, even as Draco read over her shoulder. "This part doesn't matter. It will just make everyone more- just don't read it."

"Exclusive Extract from the Upcoming Biography of Albus Dumbledore, by Rita Skeeter," Draco read, and made a face. The photograph of the young Dumbledore family that accompanied the headline didn't lull him into any false sense of security. He had no illusions what kind of lies would be spewed out by that woman about Dumbledore, mainly because he remembered them from the blue loop.

"Let me see," Harry said anxiously, and Hermione kept the Prophet away from him protectively.

"It's just nonsense," she said in a prickly tone, and shoved the Prophet back into her bag. "The last thing you need right now after everything that's happened-" Draco had the feeling the revelation about Theo was included in that blanket statement. "The last thing is to have to face this- this absolute drivel about a man you respected and cared for, Harry. So trust me and leave it alone. The only surprise for us here is the part *against* some of the Death Eaters."

"Are they, what, a splinter group?" Ron wondered. "A new separate faction? They must have done something really crazy to piss You-Know-Who off."

"I think they might have," Draco said hastily, wanting to get Harry as quickly as possible off the topic of the article about Dumbledore, for his sake. "I heard my father saying something about how capturing us would gain them forgiveness from the Dark Lord. That he would take them back if they did that. I think they might be on the run from him, just the same as us."

The prospect that his father had wanted to turn him in to Voldemort to save his own hide was one he hardly blinked at now. The involvement of his mother with such a group and their agenda against him, no less of that indifference. It wasn't a surprise, none of it, and after today, his chest felt like it had been hollowed out from the inside. He wasn't sure how much more he could feel today, after he had tried to help Hermione with her hair and she'd pulled away like he was a danger.

"With the Elder Wand," Hermione observed crisply. "So let's not make the mistake of thinking them helpless."

"I had that vision," Harry said slowly, seeming to extricate himself from painful thoughts about Dumbledore. "The Dark Lord was so furious. He wanted to kill Bellatrix Lestrange.

Maybe they had run away from him. Or maybe they did *because* he was so angry."

"All we can do is speculate now," Hermione sighed. "What we have to focus on is that Horcrux and how to destroy it. We came far too close to those Death Eaters-"

"You mean my immediate and extended family," Draco drawled, and didn't get the laugh he'd hoped for, though it was true, wasn't it?

"Too close to the Horcrux falling into their hands," Hermione finished. "How does it seem, Harry? You've been wearing it all day. Do you feel anything different about it?"

"No," Harry said glumly. "It's just... I don't know, kind of heavy."

"Let me try it," Hermione said curiously, and Harry fished it off his neck, for her to take it in her grasp. "Do you feel any different now?"

"Oh," Harry said with audible surprise, looking around at the others like something massive had changed. A small smile dawned on his face, a Snitch-catching smile. "That feels... better. I don't know why. Not so... clammy."

"Better?" Hermione asked, and Harry agreed. "Harry, you don’t think you’ve been possessed, do you?"

"Does he seem possessed to you?" Draco snorted. "Harry, do you have any gaps in your memory?"

"No, of course not," Harry said, in a voice like he almost wished he did, given the new memories he'd made today.

"So, not possessed," Draco said, the preeminent expert on this topic as Luna's cousin. "But it did make you feel... different?"

"I don't know," Harry said thoughtfully. "I have been feeling, I don't know, down today. And not just because of what's been happening. Everything's just seemed so hopeless. When we were fighting the Death Eaters, there was this voice in my head that kept saying we couldn't win. I've never felt that before. When we escaped, it kept saying Draco would die no matter what we did. That's why I went off to the cave again, though I know it was stupid now..."

"Hmm," Hermione said. "Well, if it's not possessing you, it still does seem to have a mental effect on you. Harry, I don't think we should keep wearing it, any of us. We can just keep it in the tent."

Some of Harry's natural fierce stubbornness showed through then, an attractive sight. "We are not leaving that Horcrux lying around. If we lose it, if it gets stolen-"

"Oh, all right, all right," Hermione agreed. "But we'll take turns wearing it, so nobody keeps it on too long."

"No," Draco interrupted. "Let me." Hermione handed it over, with a look on her face like it was against her better judgment. Draco settled it around his neck.

For a moment, it was a sensation like plunging underwater, the world around him and its sensations growing just that bit muffled. Then his brain seemed to adjust to the intrusion at its edges, and it felt again like nothing was wrong, except for the burn of the talon wand in his pocket. Just an addition to the letters HJP around his neck, in the person of a curiously heavy locket.

Draco waited until the others were settling into the tent for the night. He didn't dare try and move his sleeping bag close to Harry's tonight. But it was alright. He had a plan that would gain back the ground he had lost, if only he could make it come off.

Some part of his mind told him he was being careless and foolish, even as the active part guided him through saying he was going to get some air and walking casually out of the tent. Then he found a spot as far from the tent as possible in the clearing and sat himself on the ground.

He felt that lifting sense of relief that Harry had described when he took the locket off his neck, the sense of futility lifting with it, and his new project coming to seem that much more possible. He set the locket down on the ground in the thicket of leaves, his wand's light making it gleam in its place like an ember of flame. It would soon be illuminated far brighter. He was sure of that, whatever the outcome, as he took the Mirror of Espilce out of his pocket and laid it on the ground in front of the locket. Now both small magical objects glittered for him in the filtered moonlight, like the beginning of a dragon's hoard of evil things.

Flame appeared at the ends of Draco's hands without a word, his pyromancy bringing the blue lights to life at his fingertips. The mirror turned to a small sphere of blue in its vicinity, reflecting back the fire faithfully, while rivulets of blue ran over the reflective surface of the locket and its unmistakable green S. Draco took a deep breath, gathering himself, and told himself this could work, even if the Liquid Fiendfyre hadn't. He would destroy the Horcrux, and then the others would have to forgive him.

"Incendio," Draco hissed, making the fire spike at his fingertips, then he sent it through the air to strike at the Mirror of Espilce. No ordinary mirror, the palm-sized piece of silver just took on the color like a neon light in London city, illuminating the clearing with disproportionate brightness, as the fire seemed to drip off it like perspiration. He imagined the fire itself cooking there, getting hotter as it had in the Chamber of Secrets, hotter than any flame could naturally be in that pouring of Patronus blue-white... and then he sent the fire out from the mirror onto the Horcrux.

Fire shot from Draco's fingertips, to the mirror to intensify and compress it, into the waiting locket. There was no immediate change, no dramatic opening of the locket at the sheer heat, but the fire did strike its smooth metallic surface, spilling out like a splash of color around it to ignite the brush beneath. Draco waved a hand, focusing his pyromancy to keep all the flame confined within a small ovular space, then closed his eyes to center himself, before flexing his fingers and sending out another jet of flame into the mirror.

"Dragon, are you out here, I wanted to..."

The sound of a voice intruding, even Harry's, was a distraction he couldn't afford, not with the fire before him that could burn the entire forest down in its intensity should it be let loose. Draco didn't turn his head, didn't acknowledge Harry, just kept sending the fire against the locket, as if he could batter it to breaking by persistence. Harry's voice came closer, though, and less uncertain. "Hey, what are you doing? Draco? Draco? What is this?"

"The Mirror of Espilce!" Draco yelled. "It can destroy the Horcrux, I'm sure of it!" Behind him, over the crackling and the air-sizzling heat of the flames, he could hear Ron and Hermione calling out at the sound of Harry shouting, and climbing out of the tent as well. "Let me destroy it!"

"Draco, stop!" Hermione's voice yelled back, and Draco turned fully back to his task, picturing wards coming off his usual control of his magic like he usually did with the talon wand, knots being undone one by one to let out the full fatal force of it. He was sure he had the destructive power within him to wreck a thousand lockets, if only he could unleash it all without setting himself ablaze with it.

He needed to concentrate, and the panicked voices of the Gryffindors behind him were not helping. He thought of taking up the talon wand and casting Langlock at them, but that would take his concentration off the fire, which was already fading from the distraction...

"Damn it!" Draco cried out, letting out a rush of fire in pure frustration, all the fire he could picture welling up in the core of his body and streaming out of his fingertips, falling onto the Mirror of Espilce and amplifying as it had against the Basilisk. Draco's element was fire, and if any fire could burn away the Horcrux, it was his fire... it had to be...

"Stop!" the others kept yelling, and Draco realized with a start that the fire was spreading past the confines he had intended to keep it in, catching on old dead leaves and radiating outwards. Draco drew the fire inwards with a gasp, all of the burning leaves and brush soaring inside to impact at the unmoved surface of Slytherin's locket. They hit it and fell away with the fire almost seeming absorbed, their burning turned impotent.

"It's not working!" Ron yelled, waving his arms behind him, and Draco gritted his teeth, feeling magical exhaustion begin to creep at his edges. This was less like killing the Basilisk, and more like when he'd tried every spell he knew to destroy the Mirror of Erised in first year, and that too had been left just as untouched. Harry and Hermione's voices joined Ron's in agreement, but Draco flattened his palms in the air with a hard flourish, sending out one last desperate jet of fire into the mirror. Once it faded away, the Horcrux was no less perfect than it had been before, save for the coating of some very black ashes.

Once Draco had collapsed fully to his knees, and it seemed positive that he was done his useless attempts, Hermione stalked past him and snatched up the locket, putting it around her own neck with a huff. "Draco, we *discuss* these things first-" she began to say, only for Harry to insert himself between them, looking less miffed like Hermione, and closer to downright fury.

"What were you thinking?" Harry screamed at him as soon as the fire faded, leaving the locket unharmed between them. Draco shrugged lackadaisically, trying to hide the drained feeling the making of the flame had taken out on him.

"You're the one who told us to be careful with this thing, Draco," Ron said shakily somewhere behind him. "You could have burned the whole forest down."

"Are you alright?" Harry cried out, and seized Draco's shoulders with his rough grip. Draco's gaze was forced to meet those scrutinizing green eyes in the moonlight, and he nodded weakly, although he was not sure if he was telling the truth. "Draco, forget the forest, you could have burned yourself! What are you thinking, trying something like that after the injury you had today?"

"It's all healed," Draco protested, trying to grasp just how badly he'd fucked up in the eyes of the Gryffindors. It seemed to be quite a bit, to judge by the fierce way Harry was gripping onto him. Even if Draco didn't necessarily mind that under other circumstances.

"And you were doing this in secret too!" Harry exclaimed in frustration, not letting Draco go, nor letting their gazes part, much as Draco wished he could escape Harry's. "Why didn't you just tell us what you thought might work? We should have done this together! Have you lost your mind?"

"Forgive me for thinking I could destroy the Horcrux myself!" Draco yelled back, his very weakness spurring him on to bite back, while Ron pulled Hermione and the Horcrux back from the radius of Draco and Harry and their screaming. He caught a glimpse of Hermione putting the Horcrux around her own neck.

"It should have worked! It should have!" Harry's ferocious stare turned to bafflement. *I deserved for that to work.* "The mirror should have done it! Do you have any idea what it took," Draco snatched up the mirror from the ground and pocketed it, but not before brandishing it in front of Harry, "What it took to get this useless fucking mirror?"

"What," Harry hissed, "You killed someone for it, didn't you?"

"That's right!" Draco yelled. "That's right! So maybe-" It was on the tip of Draco's tongue, *So maybe you had better stay out of my way.*

"Why do you do this?" Harry groaned. "Why do you act like you have to do everything alone? Why didn't you tell me about Nott? Why don't you trust me, even now? I thought you'd changed, but you haven't changed at all!"

"Oh, so what are you going to do, dump me again?" Draco spat, only to experience an instant of blinding terror when Harry looked past him and snapped,

"Do you think you could give us a bloody minute alone!"

"No problem," Ron said, ashen-faced, and pulled Hermione with him back into the tent, although it was likely they would still hear the screaming.

So Draco raised his wand and cast Muffliato grimly, ready for the absolute worst to come. And then he turned to face Harry Potter.

Bulstrode Manor

"Is that what you want? For this to be over?" Harry yelled, as soon as they were as alone as they could get. "If I'm not enough for you- enough to tell the damned truth-"

Draco forced himself to put the talon wand away, much as it was buzzing angrily against his palm. It seemed to wish him to curse Harry for his hostility. "It's not what I want! It's never what I wanted!" *I want to be with you until the day I die.*

"Then what?" Harry was panting, flushed with anger. He might never have made a more beautiful sight than now, furious in the moonlight, with smoke billowing up from the aftermath of what Draco had tried to do. "Do you expect me to just forget you killed Nott and didn't tell me?"

Draco took a step closer, magic depleted but the flow of brutal energy between him and Harry never stronger. "Believe me, you don't think I know what a mistake you've made, being with me? Perfect heroic Harry Potter with- with-" Draco gestured to himself with the utmost of contempt, unable to produce words bad enough to express what he was. "With *this*? You should hate me! You should be afraid of me! You're right, you should never forget that I killed Theo for you-"

"What are you talking about?" Harry interrupted, eyes blazing. "Do you think I could ever hate you? Or be afraid of you? You're Draco, you're my-" He broke off, since indeed the status of what he currently was to Harry seemed to be up in the air. "I hate it when you talk like that! I hate it! You're not- not some evil thing, Draco. You're just a liar!"

Harry's hands seized Draco's shoulders, trying to make him understand. "I'm not angry that you're a killer. You need to understand that. I know that. If you tell me Nott had to die, then I believe you. What I can't understand is why you didn't trust me enough to tell me. I thought things had changed, but..."

Harry was not just beautiful in this moment. He was also further away from Draco than ever, even while touching him.

"I'll do better," Draco heard himself plead, terribly weak and empty. "This was- an anomaly. I won't hide anything else from you anymore."

Harry let go of Draco. "That's what you said before."

"What do you want me to do?" Draco said, voice gone uncomfortably close to begging. "Do you need to hear how much I love you? How much I need you? Because that hasn't changed, that will never change-"

"You don't trust me," Harry said, like a judge delivering a sentence. Draco regretted it now, not telling about Theo, except he hadn't wanted to face it either, he'd been so disgusted and broken by what he'd done, but there was no way to explain to Harry how Draco hadn't wanted it to be true, how much it had ruined him, killing a boy he had used to love...

"I think," Harry said, voice shaky but determined, "That this needs to end."

"No!" Draco exclaimed, running up and grabbing Harry by the shoulders now, prepared to go sobbing to his knees if that was what it took. "You can't, Harry, I need you too much..."

Harry shook Draco off. "Draco," Harry said, eyes gone more distant. "We can be... friends. We'll- we'll have to be. But I can't be more with you. Not anymore."

Harry turned and walked towards the tent. Draco dropped the Muffliato then raced after him, inside the tent where Ron and Hermione were waiting tensely, Hermione playing nervously with the locket. Draco had no shame at all. He kept begging even when they were in front of their friends, because Harry didn't understand how little time there was left.

"Harry, please don't do this," Draco said loudly, seizing Harry by the arm and arresting his retreat. "You can say whatever you want to me. Take it out on me however you want. Just don't end this. I can't survive it."

"Of course you can survive it, dragon," Harry said with damnable tenderness, extracting his arm gently. "You can survive anything."

"What's going on?" Ron asked, and Hermione elbowed him in the ribs.

"Oh, isn't it obvious?" she said despairingly, and then grabbed Ron and pulled him *out* of the tent.

"Please," Draco said as soon as they were gone. "Please, Harry. You can't do this to me. To- to you. You need me too, don't you? Don't you love me?"

Harry stopped where he stood, looking stricken. "Of course I do, Draco," he said despairingly. "You don't know how much. I just... maybe I just need some time."

When Harry Potter made up his mind, there was no changing it. And he had set himself against Draco firmly at last. At least he didn't want Draco to leave their group here, which Draco had almost feared. But he didn't want to be more than friends anymore, and that was final.

And there was only so much Draco could fight against what, after all, he knew he deserved.

The next morning dawned with an unseasonable chill. Hermione made noise about whether they shouldn't change their campsite and keep moving, to avoid detection, but no one was enthused enough by the prospect to take her up on it, much as they perhaps should.

Hermione made the gesture of inviting Draco to trim her self-cut hair for her. It meant a great deal, after she'd pulled away from him the previous night at his offer. Draco knew it was out of pity, after what had happened with him and Harry, but he lacked the will to resent that. He took Hermione's hair and carefully cut it, until it took on the semblance of what it had been before, just a little shorter.

The mood around camp still remained dismal in the wake of Bellatrix's attack and everything that had followed, even though they were free of her tracking- at least theoretically. Ron donned the locket that morning, and promptly began snipping at the others about how this wasn't exactly what he'd expected, in Harry's great mission from Dumbledore.

"We've already made progress," Harry said forcefully, glaring at Ron. "We have a Horcrux. We just need to figure out how to destroy it. We haven't succeeded yet, but we will. I'm sure of it."

Draco ached to sit beside Harry, to put his arm around those strong shoulders, or feel an arm encircle his own. It was almost startling, the realization that he couldn't now- that if he tried, Harry would rebuff him.

"The question is how," Hermione sighed. "I thought today I'd take another look at the book Professor Dumbledore left us and see if I missed anything. Draco, will you help me?" Draco nodded, and she squared her jaw with a confidence she clearly didn't feel. "The headmaster wouldn't have left Harry this mission without there being a way to destroy them."

"Yeah, Basilisk venom," Ron said caustically. "Maybe he wasn't counting on us losing Hogwarts, though. Or that Draco would burn the remainder of the Basilisk to nothing, right?" That part of the story of Theo's death had unfortunately sunk in with the others too.

"He could have stored some of the venom somewhere, if there was a safe manner to extract it," Hermione mused. "There could be some inside that Snitch he left Harry, if we could only get it open."

"There's no way he could have left it to us in the Deluminator, that was all picked over by the Ministry," Draco added. "Or the book, right? That leaves the Snitch and... the Sword of Gryffindor." Draco remembered the vial of Pensieve memories left to him in the dagger hilt by Periander, and thought of the hilt of Gryffindor's sword with more excitement. "What do you think?"

"Why are we so sure Dumbledore did leave it to us, how to destroy it?" Ron sniped, before breaking off with a long, feeling yawn. "Maybe he didn't get around to it before Bellatrix Lestrange put an end to his plans."

"Oh, Ron, you always have to be so *negative*," Hermione began, in a tone like Harry and Draco weren't the only couple they should be worrying about, but Draco breezed past with rare optimism.

"The Sword of Gryffindor," he said thoughtfully. "We don't have it, but what do we know about it? Harry, did you notice anything unusual when you used it?"

Harry hesitated a second before speaking to Draco, as if having to modulate his voice and manner now that they were no longer together. "I don't know. It was... well-made, I guess? It was just a sword, as far as I could tell. It did the job."

"Killing the Basilisk," Hermione said slowly. "That's what you mean- oh! Oh my God!" The three of them turned to look at her with her sudden increase in volume. "What if it's not about

what the sword is, but what it's done?"

"Basilisk venom," Draco breathed, shock resonating through him. "Harry stabbed the Basilisk in the mouth with it. What if there's some of the venom still left in the sword? What if- what if Dumbledore left me the Sword of Gryffindor to destroy the Horcruxes?"

"Well, I'm lost," said Ron, and Draco began to wave his arms, trying to explain their grand revelation in terms a grumpy, sleepy Ron could follow. Ron began to wake up and brighten as he understood the idea, the Basilisk venom's transfer and lingering somehow, while Harry watched Draco flail with an expression that almost looked like fondness despite himself.

"The Sword of Gryffindor," Hermione said reverently. "Could it really be so simple?"

"Simple?" Ron said with a harsh laugh. "Didn't they return it to Hogwarts? What's simple about that?"

"They should have given me that sword," Draco said fiercely, dismay threatening the high of discovery. "It belonged to me. It's mine. It should have gone to me!"

"But it didn't," Ron said bitterly, "And now it's in the hands of You-Know-Who. The Ministry handed it right over to him, didn't they? There's no making it into Hogwarts now."

"There has to be," Draco said, flexing his fingers. He could feel the presence of the talon wand in his pocket, a counterweight against doubt, the affirmation that with it, nothing was impossible for him. Except, perhaps, retaining the love of Harry Potter. "And we'll find a way to do it."

Grimmauld was a place they'd sworn they would never set foot in again, and yet there they were, waiting.

They didn't have to wait for long. Luna must have been checking her coin very often, to see and come so quickly, or maybe there was some signal to it. Either way, she was there, appearing only to let out a high squeal and fling herself at her cousin.

"Oh, Draco, it's you! I've been so worried!" she cried out, as if it had been months instead of a week and change, but in truth it did feel far longer than it had been since they'd last parted. She pulled away from him to hug Hermione and exclaim over Harry and Ron too. She seemed so gratified to find them all visibly unharmed, it was clearly not what she had been expecting.

"You need my help? With your mission?" she said once she let go, pulling out the marked coin to revisit the message that summoned her to Grimmauld. "You still can't tell me what's going on?"

"No, Luna," Draco said uncomfortably, "But we do need your help, it's true. We can't get this done without you. You, and some others we need you to bring to us."

Luna wasn't surprised to hear they wanted Ginny and Neville, but she faltered when he said they needed Millicent Bulstrode. "Yes, we need Millie," Draco repeated. "Ginny can bring her along, can't she?"

"It just might take some time," Luna said hesitantly. "Her and Neville don't live at Xaphan like we do, so..."

"We'll need her," Harry said. "We'll need you all, Luna. Thank you so much for agreeing to help us."

Luna let out her nervous trilling laugh. Draco fought off the urge to cling to her side, to the calm she exuded, to her unconditional acceptance. "Of course I will!" she said excitedly. "I wanted to come with you all, remember? I want to be part of the fight too. Whatever I can do to help. Is it just getting the others together that you need from me?"

"No," Draco said, and pulled her close. "Listen, Luna- you can't repeat this to anyone, not even the others yet- but we need your help to pull off a heist. The biggest the Rat Thieves have ever done." He hesitated, not sure if he should spill more, but Luna's cute inquisitive face pulled the truth out of him. "We're going to rob Hogwarts."

It was two days later when Luna let them know she'd arranged for both Neville and Millie to come to Xaphan, and be taken to Grimmauld together once the four were all assembled. They ended up in the living room at Grimmauld, reassured by Luna telling them Remus and Sirius spent all their time at Xaphan now. Millie was unfamiliar with the place, but didn't make much comment on it, even the large painting of the London skyline gifted to them by the Grangers. She merely gazed at it a long moment, then snuck a glance at Ginny, and then turned her more skeptical eyes onto Draco, waiting already for him to spit out why she was here.

"It's so good to see all of you," Neville ventured, though Millie's baleful stares seemed to be affecting him too. "Luna told me we wouldn't for a while."

"Yeah, where have you all been, anyway?" Ginny asked, shifting to lean her side against her girlfriend's where they sat. Draco felt an unexpected rush of jealousy at the sight of their casual intimacy, something which had used to be his with Harry and was no longer. "I know you left a note and everything, but Professor Black and Professor Lupin still lost their minds until Professor Snape- Draco?"

Draco had let out a small chortle. He held up a hand in apology. "Sorry. It's just- I know he'll be dueling master, but Professor Black? Merlin, Sirius *is* going to be Professor Black, isn't he? Come on, that is just objectively hilarious-"

"Get on with it," Millie said calmly, so standoffish that Draco worried a hint of their purpose might have leaked through from Luna and Ginny to her. Or maybe she was smart enough to intuit she and her girlfriend were about to be involved in something dangerous.

"Professor Dumbledore gave me a mission," Harry said guardedly, and Neville nodded enthusiastically.

"We know, we've all heard, Luna's told us," he said earnestly, earning Luna a glare from Ron.

"Was I not supposed to tell?" Luna said innocently. "It was in your letter saying goodbye, too, wasn't it?"

"No, that's alright, Luna," Harry said with a sigh. "What you all need to know is that we've been pursuing the mission Professor Dumbledore left me. And now we need your help, every one of you, if we're going to be able to move forward."

Hermione glanced around nervously, seeming to remember not everyone here was fugitives off on a maverick hunt. "I know you might not have long, if your parents are going to worry about you..."

Neville gave a bashful smile that made Draco miss him even more than he did already. "My parents just think I've gone to Xaphan to see Luna. I do that a lot."

"My parents are on a business trip," Millie said flatly. "Well, my father's on one, and my mother's gone with him."

Draco frowned, with far more in consideration here than just Millie's support structure. "How long is that going to last?"

Ginny took Millie's hand and squeezed it, a sweet sight, but Millie's tone was lackadaisical, almost bored. Perhaps practicedly so. "At least a year, as far as I know. It's just me at Bulstrode Manor. My parents will be in France avoiding the war until further notice."

She and Ginny made a striking contrast as always, in coloring and in stature, but Ginny looked the one protective of Millie now. "They left her behind," Ginny said hotly, eyes blazing like her bright red hair, and Millie gave her a look that seemed intended to be far more severe than it ended up.

"Stop, don't be all sentimental about it. I'm not. It just gives me more freedom."

And, Draco thought with only slight compunction, it couldn't be any more perfect for their purposes.

"Whatever it is," Millie said brusquely, "I'm not about to do anything that will put me or Ginny in danger." She seemed content to let Luna and Neville fall into whatever danger they liked.

Draco played with his hair noncommittally. "I wouldn't say danger, per *se*..." he wheedled.

Trust Harry to bluntly cut to the heart of it all. "We need to get into Hogwarts."

The air was let out of the living room for a long moment, long enough for their visitors to all exchange glances rather like they thought the Boy Who Lived had gone round the bent.

"Hogwarts," Ginny finally said skeptically. "*Hogwarts* Hogwarts. You mean, the place crawling with Death Eaters. The one where You-Know-Who lives. That one.."

Draco gave her a bright, slightly manic smile. "Right, that's the one."

Millie was quick to ask a simple, "Why?"

Ron fidgeted. "I'm sorry, but we can't tell you all that."

"We're just going to need you to trust us that this is important. More important than anything," Hermione said with her own sense of gravitas, but the others still seemed skittish at the idea.

"Important enough to risk Harry Potter going inside You-Know-Who's lair?" Ginny said with a shudder, and Harry nodded bravely, like there was not even a question. If Harry himself felt fear at the idea, he didn't show it. He cast as heroic and unshaken a figure as ever, so much so that you could almost believe in him, rather than simply think him mad, to listen this much to Draco Black.

"*We're* not going to Hogwarts as students, though," Millie said, sounding glad to throw a practical obstacle in the way of the plan.

"That's right," Neville said tentatively. "We're all spending the year at Xaphan."

Draco didn't bother trying to explain with words, wondering how long he had before they lost them completely on this idea. He took Hermione's bag from her, opened it wide, and said loud enough for everyone to hear, "Accio Polyjuice potion." A great number of vials of it slapped out into his hand for them to see.

Millie gasped, along with Ginny and Neville, but not Luna. She was all too aware of the lengths that Draco was capable of going when the need seemed to arise. "Do the four of you plan to go as the four of us to Hogwarts?" Luna asked, rather chipperly. She sounded to have the most faith in them.

"No, that would never work," Hermione sighed. They had considered it, but found it came up wanting. "All of you would be under watch and suspicion, especially the members of Dumbledore's Army."

"We need to go to Hogwarts in the guise of students who are more trusted," Harry said.

"I don't understand," Neville said, and Luna slid closer to him, leaning her head on his shoulder, making Draco experience another sliver of jealousy.

Draco looked Millie straight in the eye for this. It was the way she would respect most, even if the words he was about to say would be more likely to bring out curses than offers of assistance. He hated to speak the words, even as he put on a good face for them. "Students that only you could bring to us, Mills."

Millie stood there motionless for a moment, then her impassive face came alive with horror. "No."

"What is he talking about?" asked Ginny, and Millie took a deep, shuddering breath.

"No," Millie said at last with effort, hard and pointed. "Leave them out of it. They have nothing to do with this. Your war against the Dark Lord, that's not their war- not my *friends*-"

"Isn't it, though?" Ron asked with little sympathy. "Zabini, Crabbe, Goyle, and Parkinson. Just by going to Hogwarts, won't they be choosing a side?"

"Of course they're going to Hogwarts," Millie hissed defensively. "Anyone whose parents aren't in the Order of the Phoenix or out of the way like mine would be mad not to. It doesn't take a genius to know what will happen-"

"We'll give them the chance to help us willingly," Hermione said, a token offer if ever there was one.

"Draco, was this your idea?" Millie asked, sniffing out the culprit correctly. Her gaze of horrified loathing went then right to him, pinning him where he stood. "Haven't we done enough to them already? Haven't *you*?"

Draco put on his most uncaring face, even as his insides roiled. "It's the best way I can think of into Hogwarts, Millie. That's what it comes down to. Nothing else can weigh into our consideration."

Millie's eyes darkened. It was a miracle she was still letting Ginny hold her hand, in the mood she was entering. "You have changed, haven't you?"

Ginny Weasley of all people was the one to speak up then in Draco's defense. "Millie, it's a war..."

Millie rounded on her furiously, snatching her hand away, and shouted, "Do you think I don't know that?"

Quiet reigned at Grimmauld, until finally Millie rubbed her eyes and hung her head, reaching out for Ginny again with an ashamed manner. "I'm sorry, baby. I didn't mean to yell. It's just..."

"Will you do it?" Draco was brave enough to ask, and received a loathing stare in response.

"I hate you," she spat at Draco.

Draco shrugged elegantly. "Seems to me I'm not hearing a no."

Once they returned to the forest of Dean, Harry pulled Draco aside, leading him behind a thicket of trees. Draco brightened at the gesture, putting on his most optimistic face even as he was still sickened inside by what he'd had to do. "Why, Harry, you want me all alone?" he drawled. "Should I be ready for a thawing of hostilities?"

"I- what?" Harry said, eyes focusing on Draco like the very act of looking at him was fraught, and Draco smirked and stepped closer to him.

"I mean," Draco said, "Is there a *special* reason you wanted to get me alone, dragonslayer?"

Harry jumped back like he'd been propositioned by Bellatrix Lestrange. "No! No! I just- don't do that, Draco, you know we're not-"

"I know," said Draco, affecting nonchalance, and in truth he had expected nothing less. "What do you want, *Potter*?"

"I just wanted to make sure you were okay!" Harry protested, brimming with sincerity. "You can put on a good act, Draco, like it doesn't mean anything to you, but I know it must be difficult for you, plotting against your old friends like this..."

Draco gave his best careless shrug, even as the reminder of what he was doing sent his heart into cacophony. "They'll be fine. Just a little nap at Bulstrode Manor and they'll be sent off Obliviated and Confunded, none the wiser. I'm fine with that."

"Draco," Harry said, and hesitated before taking his hand. "You're allowed to feel guilty."

"Not anymore, right?" Draco said with a macabre flourish of his free hand. "Now that I've killed Theo, I'm capable of anything!"

Harry's hand on his felt like a steadying weight, a silent contradiction to his words. "We'll do what we have to do," he agreed, green eyes bright. "There really is no better way. But you don't fool me, Draco Black. I know what you're feeling."

"Oh, really," Draco said more caustically. "Do you exactly how it feels, for you to hold my hand but not want to be with me? Do you know what *that* does to me?"

Harry withdrew quickly, and Draco pouted uncontrollably, missing the contact, however small and insufficient. "Aw, Harry. Don't you *want* to hold my hand?"

After everyone agreed to the plan, what it came down to was a lot of waiting. They'd launched their scheme near the start of August, but Hogwarts wouldn't be opening its doors to students until September the first. Which meant weeks of waiting, but that also gave them time for the proper preparation. They set up weekly meetings at Grimmauld to run over the plan time after time, although the crux of it all was really Millie. As much as any review, it was valuable to reinforce everyone's commitment to the plan.

In the meantime, all four of them set to scrutinizing just about every book Hermione had brought along with them, and got a fat lot of nowhere when it came to other means of magical destruction. Draco was less displeased by this failure, though, than his inability to get any closer to Harry again. Harry held himself as technically friendly but in reality painfully aloof, making a visible effort to keep Draco at the distance he had decided. There

was no more physical contact, let alone the snuggling that Draco had grown accustomed to, and he missed it like a limb he hadn't known he had before it was severed.

Sometimes Draco caught Harry staring at him, of course. One might have even characterized it as longing stares. But it never materialized into anything, and Draco couldn't push any further than he did without jeopardizing even so much as a friendship. He had to accept that he was damaged goods, too damaged to be usable anymore.

Things seemed strained between Ron and Hermione, too, but they still went off sometimes into the trees behind the thicket, to do what both Harry and Draco knew was make out. And they betrayed small physical signs of closeness that made Draco want to kill someone in the absence from Harry, so jealous he found he was of it. But that too was something he had to push down.

There was so much talking to do, after all. So much drilling the Gryffindors on Slytherin dynamics, on the gossip between their alter egos-to be, the manner they had to behave in order to be credible with anyone who wanted to talk to them. Harry was taking on the role of Blaise, after all, for which he struggled to muster enough effortless arrogance. And Hermione playing Pansy seemed always a hair's breadth away from giving the game away. Draco and Ron had easier jobs with the more taciturn Vince and Greg, but even Ron was behaving too lively and not servile enough towards "Blaise."

Most of all, it didn't help that Blaise and Pansy were a couple, a physically demonstrative one at that, and Harry and Hermione had to pretend to be physically affectionate when they role-played these things. Both of them took it with good humor if awkwardness, behaving like two siblings forced to playact romance, but it still set Draco's teeth on edge in the background, and he could tell it did the same for Ron.

"This isn't going to work," Millie declared after one such session in front of her. "No one will ever believe that this... this *Granger* is really Pansy." She seemed unable to find any better epithet for the poor job Hermione was doing at projecting Pansy's personality. "The Slytherin girls will be all over her once you get to Hogwarts, and they'll find her out quicker than Draco can curse their mouths shut."

"I'm sorry, I am trying," Hermione said nervously, and Millie heaved a massive sigh, so weighty that Draco feared she was beginning to reconsider her support of this plan. At least Ginny had the grace to keep hold of her girlfriend's hand. Not like those two ever spent long in the same room with their hands *off* each other.

People in love. Dear as some of them were to him, part of Draco would happily send them off on a boat to Siberia, to never be seen or heard from again.

"That's the problem," Millie groaned. "You keep trying too hard, and you come out wimpy and nervous. Nothing like Pansy, she's got this... this effortless je ne sais quoi. She doesn't want to let you see weakness in her." They were all gracious not to mention the many times Pansy had shown weakness in her fruitless pursuit of Draco in earlier years. But then, with Blaise securely snagged as her own, there was no need to show that mooning side of her, only a confidence that Hermione didn't seem to be able to embody no matter how much she worked at it. Millie didn't even think Hermione's walk was right.

"Wait," Neville said suddenly. "If it's that hard, why doesn't Draco take on being Pansy Parkinson?"

Draco glared instinctive daggers at Neville, but Millie looked floored at the unexpectedly good suggestion, from a boy she seemed to regard at the best of times as a kind of upjumped subterranean piece of algae. "Draco knows Pansy far better, it's true. And Granger would have less to screw up as Vince. Alright, everyone, switch around. Come on, Draco, you all said the fate of the world rests on whatever you're doing here and won't tell us. Are you going to risk that just because you're scared to be a girl for an afternoon?"

"I'm not," Draco muttered, more concerned in truth about embarrassing himself in front of Harry.
"Draco would make an excellent girl," Luna said brightly, and that did earn her a death glare from her beloved cousin. "I mean that as a compliment," she added earnestly.

"I'll do it, okay? Hope you're looking forward to getting personal with me, lover boy," Draco groused at Harry, who got the immediate look of a man on his way to Azkaban who'd just caught first sight of the Dementors.

"Okay, we have our Pansy Parkinson," Millie said briskly. "Now let's see what Draco can do."

Draco did indeed prove a more convincing Pansy than Hermione in the playacting that followed over the weeks, to the point that Millie declared it a disturbingly good impression. Hermione, for her part, was only too happy to slide into her role as one of the well-meaning but dim-witted Vince and Greg, where her and Ron's main job would be to eat sweets and look bulky and menacing on the train.

So it was that they arrived at Bulstrode Manor on the morning of the first of September, all moderately confident in the roles they had chosen. All they needed now was the intended victims, to begin the play.

Bulstrode Manor was a manor in truth mainly in name. It was the smallest of all of their parents' houses, although in truth one of the most habitable, with the least trappings of fine ancestry and Slytherin drama. Draco didn't know if they even had a family tree somewhere on the premises, and he'd never asked. The time he'd spent here when he was young had mainly been in the large green courtyard, playing Quidditch with the Kingsnakes. There was also a massive glass chandelier near the entrance, which constantly sent prisms everywhere, and had fascinated Draco as a child. Nothing else particularly stood out, though, in the whites and beiges of the house. Nor would the elves. Millie had ordered her house elves to keep to the kitchens and their quarters today.

The reception hall opened out onto the grand chandelier and then branched out to let out visitors into the cloak room and sitting room before widening into the great hall, where a massive two-poster spiral staircase with a carved tan banister dominated over proceedings. Draco had never been up those steps, but Pansy had, and she had often gone on at length

about how unladylike Millie's bedroom was, how its design was ruined by the preponderance of Quidditch paraphernalia.

It seemed Ginny hadn't been up those stairs either, given that this morning turned out to be her first time at Bulstrode Manor. She seemed embarrassed to have to admit so to the others, but it was an unavoidable fact, that Millie had never had her into her childhood home before. They'd always spent time together either at Hogwarts or Xaphan, and tomorrow would begin at Xaphan together. But it was a notable omission, never having let Ginny in here to this part of her life, when her parents weren't even around to be a problem. Ginny was quiet as Millie gave them a cursory tour, which mainly revolved around their places of interest: the reception hall, and the sitting room where she would invite the Slytherins once they arrived.

There was some discussion of the matter, but eventually, Harry agreed to cede the invisibility cloak to Draco, as the one who would be keenest at reading his old friends. The others crept into the cloak room and hid behind the racks, or else lurked behind the great staircase, waiting for the Slytherins' arrival. First, though, Millie had to send off her fateful message.

Draco hovered beside her as she drafted a note that was purposefully curt and hurried: *Come to Bulstrode Manor. Bring the others. I know who killed Theo.* She didn't sign it, but she didn't need to. Then it went off by owl to find Pansy, presumably still at her house this early instead of Platform 9 and 3/4. Millie had a persistent and stubborn owl, after all, nonsensically called Catacomb, who bore little respect for the Statute of Secrecy. Catacomb soared out of the front door of Bulstrode Manor, to lead Draco and Millie's old friends into their clutches.

Draco spent some time pacing the floor under the cloak, worried that this lure wouldn't suffice to bring them, at least not all of them, but he had worried unnecessarily. Catacomb's missive bore fruit with a sudden wave of cracklings. He followed Millie to the front door, where Blaise, Vince, Greg, and Pansy had Apparated in together, all in their Slytherin school uniforms. They all looked the same as they had the last time Draco saw them, when they had faced off against him demanding to know what had happened to Theo Nott.

They had their bags for school with them on the doorstep, which was an unexpected windfall of luck. Draco had expected to have to go around their different houses picking them up with their double, and risking contact with the parents. But so far it was going better than planned.

Millie sprang into hostess mode, opening the door for them and letting Vince and Greg haul their baggage with them. Blaise held out his hand for a stiff handshake with Millie, which she returned, looking up at his taller frame with a misgiving in her eyes she certainly didn't need to fake. Vince and Greg flanked him on either side like his bodyguards, and Pansy hovered nearby buzzing with nervous energy.

It seemed to take an effort to make up her mind, but Pansy suddenly darted forward and hugged Millie, squeezing her around the waist very tightly. "I missed you," Pansy hissed miserably, voice inflected with affection as well as recrimination. Draco hastily backed away, giving them the space for their reunion, even as he feared the conflicted look on Millie's face. There was no way Millie wouldn't stick to the plan, was there?

"You said you know something," Blaise said, voice cutting off Millie and Pansy's hug like an arm shoved between them. The ambiguous status of Millie with her fellow Slytherins, after her departure of Hogwarts with Ginny, and a summer without contact, hung in the air. Draco had been counting on that uncertainty.

"Here," Millie said, lowering her voice, "Come with me," and they took this secrecy as a matter of course, even though they were supposedly the only five people in the house. If they'd heard of Millie's parents deserting England, that was. There was no telling how deep the divide between Millie and her oldest friends had really become.

Millie had tea to serve them, with a kettle whose contents she charmed hot at their arrival. She took a seat in an armchair at the head of the room, with the Slytherins sliding onto couches facing her, Blaise and Pansy on one and Vince and Greg on the other. Pansy's legs slung over Blaise's lap, as if by reflex, and they eyed Millie with full focus, as if waiting for her to drop a bomb on them. So far, Vince and Greg had been completely withdrawn and silent. Draco wondered how they felt about Theo's death, if they had mourned him as strongly as the other two. He suspected that in their own way, they had.

"So," Blaise said, clearing his throat, with well-practiced skepticism. "In the note you sent Pansy, you said we had to come because you found out who killed Theo. How can we even trust you anymore? Why would it matter what you say?"

The hurt on Millie's face seemed unfeigned, even though he was more right than he knew to question her. "I still care about Theo," Millie said bluntly. "I didn't want anything to happen to him, or any of you. And now that I know who did this to him..."

"Who?" Greg blurted, at last unable to hold himself back, and Blaise held up a restraining hand.

"Are you coming to Hogwarts, Millie?" he asked, and Pansy's gaze fixed on Millie with the same intensity as his.

"Are you coming back to Hogwarts with us today?" Pansy asked ruthlessly. "I'm asking if you're with us, Millie. Not a word you say means shit unless you're back on our side."

"I'm on your side," Millie said without missing a beat, "Because of who it was who killed Theo," and a grim air hung in the small room, even discounting the secret presence of Draco under the cloak, like an unfriendly ghost.

"It was Draco, wasn't it," Blaise said wearily. "We all know it, Mills."

"Theo had a mission," Vince said uncomfortably, "And was sent after Draco, but Draco's the one who came out."

"I don't want it to be Draco," Pansy said fitfully, "But it is, isn't it?"

"Draco killed Theo," Millie said, and Draco's heart dropped with the surety in her voice, even though he knew she was just acting, just keeping up the script they had come up with to give them time while the others got perfectly into position. But hearing that on her lips...

"And I want revenge for it," Millie finished coldly, "And I know what you all must think of me, after the Battle of Hogwarts, but I don't know how to get it without your help."

Silence reigned for a few long moments. "You want our help to kill Draco Malfoy- Draco Black," Blaise corrected with annoyance, and Millie nodded. "What use would we be against him? He's a bloody dark lord now, isn't he? What could we do against someone like him?"

"I don't know where else to go," Millie said, voice cracking, and Draco wondered with a sinking heart how real for her this was, how much of her meant it, that she thought Draco could be behind Theo's death and wished her old friends could help her kill him for it...

The sound of someone stumbling outside came through loud and clear in the intervening silence. All of the Slytherins leapt to their feet on hair trigger, including a pale-faced Millie. "Did you hear that?" Vince demanded wide-eyed, and the others nodded. Draco mentally cursed out whoever had given away their position outside by falling- smart money would be on Neville- but there was no help for it. The Slytherins' wands had all jumped to their hands.

"It must be my parents," Millie said, voice placating, although the tension bled through her voice as much as everyone else's. "Let me go out and check."

Blaise's wand hand raised ever so slightly, and Draco couldn't take the risk there was a spell there meant for Millie. He acted on instinct, shooting out a silent Expelliarmus to Blaise before it reached his conscious thought. The Slytherins cried out in shock as Blaise's wand shot away from him and seemed to disappear in mid-air.

That was all Draco needed, that moment of hesitation. He threw off the cloak and cast Expelliarmus on Pansy. Millie disarmed Vince and Greg once she saw he had begun, their wands soaring to her free hand as easily as you like. And that was all it took. They had the four Slytherins held at wandpoint at their mercy.

"We've got them!" Millie called, and the door opened, letting in far too many Gryffindors, along with one wary pale-haired Ravenclaw. Said Ravenclaw shrieked when Vince leapt forward and tried to punch Neville, only to be driven back by a cry of Stupefy from his opponent.

"Millie," a disarmed Pansy said, eyes filling with horror, "What have you done to us? What have you *done*?" The betrayal in her voice would have floored a room full of traitors, and Millie trembled as she pocketed the wands she'd taken, her own wand still lifted to face the girl who had once been her best friend in the world.

"We should have known you couldn't be trusted," Blaise spat, then turned and froze when he saw Draco standing there, pocketing Blaise's wand. "You- why is he here? Malfoy, you're dead, I'm going to kill you for what you've done to Theo-"

"Stupefy," Draco heard himself say, and Pansy grabbed onto Blaise desperately as he crumbled down beside her.

"No, please, Millie, don't do this!" Pansy pleaded. "Don't let them take us!"

"I am sorry about this, really," Hermione said nervously, then stepped forward and Stunned both Pansy and Greg, leaving the four Slytherins in a heap together on the sitting room floor.

"What now?" Millie asked bleakly. Her wand would have fallen from her own hands if Ginny hadn't taken it from her and gently put it in her pocket for her. Millie fished in her pocket and handed over to Harry the wands she'd taken without a word. Then she sank down into her chair again and put her head in her hands.

"Now," Draco said with all the strength he could muster, "Hogwarts is calling."

The New Hogwarts

They changed into their new clothes before taking the potion, to avoid ripping or ruining their old clothes. Doing it all in the same room meant a lot of awkwardly trying not to stare at others there, comically so given the seriousness of what they were about to attempt. Draco finally looked up from his self-imposed floor-staring to stop and laugh at the bagginess of Vince and Greg's uniforms on Ron and Hermione, who were dwarfed by them.

Harry was less laughable in Blaise's, being near the same size other than a little shorter. He had always looked spectacular in a Slytherin uniform. Brought out his eyes, it did, like nothing else. If only Draco had the right to touch him, just a casual touch of some kind, a teasing one to remind him of times he'd been forced into a Slytherin uniform before, either as a bet or by pretending to be a person Draco wasn't thinking about.

Harry adjusted his glasses and then didn't seem able to help himself from staring at Draco in his new uniform, particularly as Draco unbuttoned the shirt and loosened the tie. And more particularly as Draco rolled Pansy's thigh-high stockings up his legs. "Is that really how Pansy Parkinson dresses?" Harry asked, looking unduly fascinated at the sight.

"Sometimes, yeah," Draco said grimly, "And particularly for our purposes tonight."

"Right," Harry said, face falling at the reminder of Ron's plan he hated so much, and turned away from him.

Luna and the others helped them get the hairs for the Polyjuice potion, which seemed well-brewed enough to last them several hours per go. They'd need to secretly drink it more than that to accomplish their purposes, even under the best of circumstances. Draco was the only one of the four who'd never drank it before, though Hermione had a traumatic experience with it to make her hesitant as well. She looked a hair's breadth from asking Millie if she was dead sure this hair was Gregory Goyle's and not, say, her cat Mr. Wilberforth's.

"Everyone ready?" Harry asked, and after getting nods of varying enthusiasm, he took down his dose. Slowly, the other two three followed his example, with less heroic resolve to be sure, but it would do the job the same.

Draco didn't know what he'd expected, but it certainly hadn't been the ordeal that followed. Soon, all the contents of Draco's stomach were rolling in their confines, and there was a burning sensation traveling from the tips of his toes to the hair on his skull. It lengthened and darkened between his own wondering hands, like when he had been pretending to be someone else for Grindelwald, except there was a terrible tugging at his scalp.

The change seemed to sweep down his body like wildfire, shrinking him in most places while expanding him in others that soon protruded, the indescribable shock of becoming a girl where it counted. Suddenly he filled out everything he was supposed to far better, the shape of his body seeming to meld itself to the uniform as the feeling like fists moving under his skin continued, like an invisible sculptor welding and whacking him into place...

Ron and Hermione had fallen over where they stood, gasping as they expanded, while Harry stood up resolute with clenched fists, the fierce look on his face becoming an imposing one once it was Blaise Zabini's face that wore it. It was the face that had just threatened to have Draco dead, and the effect of it turning to him now was nerve-wracking despite himself. Draco forced himself to give Harry his best smile, then modulated it to be more narrow and tilted like Pansy's after a moment of thought.

It was something immeasurably disturbing in a way, finding himself in the body of a girl he'd used to date, used to kiss once upon a time. But this was the camouflage he needed to accomplish what he'd set himself to: the Sword of Gryffindor, which happened to belong to him anyway. Dumbledore had wanted it to be his, and Draco would have it, even if it was by means Dumbledore would likely never have dreamed.

"How is everyone doing?" Harry asked, glancing around the room. Draco went and opened the door to let the other four in to see the results of their transformation. They were rewarded with suitable gasps of incredulity, especially in Draco's case. Millie seemed hardly able to believe that the body of her once-best friend now held the fearsome Draco Black, but she was gracious enough not to say so, just to stare.

"Well, it would fool me," said Ginny practically, and located Hermione with a companionable smile. "You alright in there, Hermione? What's it like to be a boy?"

"I don't know," Hermione said truthfully, twisting to look at herself in her new form with the clear skittishness of a poor actress. Hopefully she would step it up once they were in the eyes of enemies. "I think I already can't wait to be me again."

"Ron doesn't fancy her so much now, huh," Draco teased, "But at least you're best friends," and nudged at Ron with his elbow playfully.

"And you're lovers," Ron said, blunt and merciless, and Draco turned to Harry with trepidation.

"Ready to be my boyfriend again?" Draco asked with all the bluster he could muster, though he was thrown by the higher sound of his new voice. It seemed to do the trick to make Harry beware anyway. Slowly, already withering a bit in his guise of Blaise, Harry nodded.

"Good luck, all of you," Neville called, "I know you can do it! That is, er, whatever you're trying to do..."

It really was heinous of them, not telling their friends why they were even breaking into Hogwarts like this, but so it had to be. "We'll keep the real ones under lock and key until you're back," Millie said grimly, holding up her pocketful of stolen wands from their doppelgangers. Draco gave her his Pansy half-smile.

Luna rushed forward and hugged Draco, not seeming to care about the new body he inhabited, just wanting one last bit of contact with her favorite cousin. "Oh, Draco," she exhaled, "Please, do be careful," and solemnly, Draco promised her they would be. Well, that was, he thought, as much as they could.

"One more thing, Luna," Draco said, and drew her to the side. He reached under his shirt, not very far with the buttons undone to show off his new cleavage, and withdrew the locket. He handed it to Luna, whose hand dropped under it, as if not having expected its singular weight.

"Is this Pansy Parkinson's?" Luna asked doubtfully.

"Put it on," Draco instructed, feeling horrible putting this burden on Luna too, but she was the one he trusted most, and there was no way around it. Luna obeyed, and something clouded on her face as it settled into place. "Now hide it, under your shirt," Draco instructed, like he and the trio had been doing for a month, and Luna did that too.

"I... don't like the way it feels," Luna said slowly, and if anyone would be sensitive to the plunging, horrible feel of a Horcrux, it would be her.

"Luna, I need you to keep this for me while I've gone to Hogwarts," Draco whispered, feeling in such a rush, and yet needing far more time to explain enough to her to make it safe. "It's really important. I can't tell you why, but it's the key to everything."

"And you gave it to me?" Luna asked, wide-eyed.

"Of course I did, Luna-Luna," Draco said affectionately, hearing his voice go high and cloying, "Who else," and she squealed and hugged him unreservedly.

He spoke then right into her ear. "Keep it on as long as you can stand. If you can't manage it any longer, give it to Neville and have him wear it the same. Luna, this is... if we don't come back- I promise you I'll try my hardest, but if we don't come back, you need to try and fight a way to destroy this locket. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Luna said softly, "Destroy it," and her constant faith seemed still unshaken. Draco gave her one last hug, then turned to join the others.

They Apparated into the outskirts of King's Cross in one mass together, their stolen bags all in tow. The walk into the station was nerve-wracking already, despite the mass of Muggles around them. Without their robes on yet, no one gave a second glance to the group of teenagers in school uniforms.

Draco didn't know why he'd already expected there to be Death Eaters and Dementors on the loose amongst the hapless travelers. He still found himself eyeing everyone they passed as if they were about to attack or unmask them at any moment. He was forced to ask himself the question whether his heart could survive this deception, if he was already so weak to it.

They arrived at the barrier of Platform 9 and 3/4, where they would be meant to go through under any circumstances, as far as they knew. "I didn't think we'd be going through this year," Harry whispered in Draco's ear, "Or ever again, even," and Draco took hold of Harry's free hand and entwined their fingers together.

"Come on, Blaise," Draco said firmly, "Let's go through together." Somehow, him and Harry's old tradition had been maintained.

They raced straight at the brick and passed through like nothing about Hogwarts had changed, only another year now of students making their way through the gateway from the Muggle world to the magical one. The Hogwarts Express waited before them, red and antiquated and charming as ever, and Harry heaved a deep breath as they waited for Ron and Hermione. He had the sense not to let go of Draco's hand, and Draco flattered himself that Harry drew some form of comfort from it.

There was one difference, of course. Prowling along the station in twos and threes in their long black robes, casting their baleful stares upon all the students who emerged out of Platform 9 and 3/4 and made their way onto the train, were Death Eaters. There wasn't the Carrows, who Draco almost expected to see after the announcement in the Prophet of Amycus's appointment as Headmaster. But they were likely already at Hogwarts, preparing for the reception of the students. There were other familiar faces anyway, who Draco almost expected to not only recognize him as not Pansy Parkinson, but as a once-Death Eater turned from their side in another world.

"Slow and confident," Draco hissed to Ron and Hermione as they emerged behind them, even as Hermione made a soft, deep noise at the sight of hovering Death Eaters like malevolent ravens. "Slow and confident. We have every right to be here, remember?"

"Right," Ron said with clearly false bravado. They made their way as a group, dropping off their bags before advancing to board the Hogwarts Express.

Draco didn't know what he'd expected, but no one stopped them in their tracks. None of the Death Eaters even gave their Slytherin faces a second look, apart from a younger man whose eyes lingered on the exposed part of Draco's chest. Which was really as designed, as it happened.

They walked down the corridors of the Hogwarts Express together, trying as best as they could not to project their submerged terror. They passed by compartments of students that Draco forced himself not to give a double-take, although it was a matter of keen interest indeed who was ending up at either Hogwarts or Xaphan. Draco picked a compartment about halfway down the train, unremarkable and likely what the real Blaise would have chosen, and whispered for Harry to verbally direct them into it.

They piled into their chosen compartment with the same air of unreality that had so far dominated proceedings, unable to believe that no one had extended their finger and shouted *Harry Potter* at them yet. "We're here," Hermione whispered fretfully, glancing around them, and Draco kicked lightly at her massive leg.

"We can't be scared," Draco hissed, "Remember, your father is a Death Eater. They're in charge now. If anything, we run this school. It's the other students who should be afraid of us." Hermione straightened up and put on her best simple-mindedly smug expression, which could have been worse. And this would be a period of brief respite, in truth, unless one of the girls in their year got the bright idea to insert herself into their compartment.

Daphne and Astoria knocked in greeting on the window of their compartment as they passed by, but otherwise, there was nothing even close to any attempted incursions upon their territory. This was an expected group, the four of them, with the notable absences being Millie, and of course Theo. Draco wondered how far disseminated in Slytherin the knowledge of Theo's death had become, and fought off a shiver. He feared Astoria might want to speak to one of them, if not all, if she had caught wind of any such rumors. She, for one, had seemed to care greatly for Draco's victim, even if the feeling hadn't been mutual...

And Draco couldn't let his guilty head go drifting off like this, he had to be Pansy Parkinson one hundred percent of the time, and Pansy was someone who commanded attention. He dedicated himself to loudly remarking upon the rightfulness of the Muggleborn Registration Commission until at last, finally, they felt the motion beneath them of the Hogwarts Express begin.

Draco hadn't expected her to be there, but somehow, despite everything, the candy lady came, offering her wares to their compartment like nothing had changed since her duties last year. She would have had to pass by prowling Death Eaters to do it, but somehow, she remained.

At Draco's silent urging, Ron and Hermione got a great load of chocolate frogs for verisimilitude, which they piled on the seats beside them. And they forced down at least some of them too, much as the anxiety in Draco's throat made him aware of the difficulty of eating, such was the pitch of nervous nausea that possessed them all.

The difficulty came when Ron unearthed one of the chocolate frog cards more remarkable than the others. "Look, er, Blaise," Ron said to Harry, and Harry reached around Draco to retrieve the card. Draco leaned over his shoulder and mentally cursed his friends when he saw the name Harry was staring at remorsefully: Albus Dumbledore, noted defeater of Grindelwald, alchemist, and ten-pin bowler.

"Nothing's changed," Harry said softly. "Rita Skeeter hasn't managed to get to his chocolate frog card, at least."

Harry turned over the message to stare at the moving portrait as if it could yield him some kind of guidance, or forgiveness for his failure to prevent his murder. That was, until Draco snatched it away from him, glancing nervously around to see if anyone had passed and possibly seen the card Harry was regarding so wistfully. No one else seemed to be passing in the corridor, but Draco still cast Incendio on the card to be safe, much to Harry and Ron's indignation.

"Dumbledore," Draco said, pitching Pansy's pushy voice loud and strident, "That old blood traitor? Good riddance to bad rubbish. What a relief that Potter and his lot turned on him and rid the world of him for good."

Draco was faced with a very angry Ron and Harry, until Hermione seized Ron's shoulder and said forcefully in her new deep voice, "Oh, you lot, you know he's just playing a role."

"She," Draco amended pointedly, fluffing his long hair. "And unlike you all, I'm playing it well. Now can we get ourselves in gear already?"

Harry and Ron seemed shaken by the accuracy of Draco's portrayal- if only they knew how many years he'd believed that kind of tripe- but Draco found an easy way to seize control of the faltering Harry Potter. He sat on him. It was easy, with Draco's shorter and lighter frame, to slide over and take Harry's lap as his chair, much as Harry tensed incredulously at his relocation. "We're supposed to be a couple, remember?" Draco hissed backwards. "Just go with it."

Harry didn't try to move Draco after that, but he did seem uncomfortable with the scene they were playing. Draco was lucky he wasn't making Harry stick his Polyjuiced tongue down Draco's Polyjuiced throat. He kept his new seat, lightly flirting with Harry as the train went on towards Hogwarts around them, only to notice the effect he was having. Harry's breathing had sped in a definitely un-Blaise-like fashion, and his hands awkwardly hung in the air near Draco's exposed thighs as if unsure where they should be touching. Draco had Harry flustered at the very least, and no mistake.

"Why, Harry," Draco whispered in his softest voice, turning on Harry's lap to regard him with facetious balefulness, "Are you doing alright? I wouldn't have expected you to be so excited by the proximity of Pansy Parkinson."

"It's not that," Harry whispered back miserably, "It's that I know that it's you in there," and exasperated as well as flattered, Draco climbed off poor Harry's lap. He did, however, curl up so his head rested in Harry's lap, lying across the seat in a casual, blasé heap. Harry stiffened immeasurably, then slowly, almost tenderly, he began to stroke Draco's long hair.

They arrived at Hogwarts in one piece, with no one coming forward to denounce them that they knew of. Harry's hand held once again in Draco's, with perhaps too much vehemence, but that was Draco's anchor against his own anxiety. He flattered himself to think it could be the same for Harry. They all took additional sips of Polyjuice in their compartment before departing it, joining the stream of students which was at once larger and smaller than Draco had expected to make the choice of Hogwarts over Xaphan.

There was, of course, the very real possibility of threats to the students' parents and families, should they fail to make the Ministry-mandated choice of Hogwarts. That pardoned anyone's enforced presence, although the appearance of several once-members of Dumbledore's Army did give Draco pause. It might be down to just the Muggleborns and children of the Order for the most part at Xaphan, unfortunate as it was to recognize the success of Voldemort's plans for his new school.

Voldemort. Voldemort was waiting somewhere inside the massive castle that loomed into vision before them as they emerged from the train. Voldemort was bound to the grounds of Hogwarts thanks to Luna, unable to depart even if he wanted to, and most assuredly awaited them inside like the youngest and most deadly of Hogwarts's ghosts. For all they knew, Voldemort could be greeting them all tonight as the real headmaster of Hogwarts, rotting skeletal reptilian frame appearing at the center of the high table instead of Amycus Carrow,

there to mystically spot out Harry in the person of Blaise and ruin everything, most likely to the point of all their deaths...

Hogwarts was beautiful, though. It remained beautiful, undeniably so. From this kind of distance in the dimming twilight, it looked undamaged, undefiled, as unchanged as if it could still have been Dumbledore awaiting as headmaster. It still looked the place of dreams, of Quidditch, of childhood rivalries and infatuations, the place where Draco had twice grown up.

They got a Thestral-drawn carriage to themselves, though Tracey Davis almost got onto theirs before Daphne Greengrass called her over to join hers. Draco heaved a secret sigh of relief and turned to his three Gryffindors with a desperate brightness, knowing he had to project enough confidence for all of them. "See? We've made it so far. This is going to be a piece of cake."

That was, as long as Draco didn't have to do something as basic as, say, *draw his wand.* The talon wand had been impossible for him to leave behind, conspicuous as it was in what looked clearly to be the wrong hands. As they lifted into the air, he ran his hand over it in his pocket, and felt a rush of reassurance. *You can do this, Draco Black. You can do this.*

There were more Death Eaters massed around the entrance to the castle. They eyed up and down each student as they made their approach, and the ones closest to the door demanded each student's name with a list. Draco had a moment of blind horror at the thought that Ron would forget which of Vince and Greg he was supposed to be, but the names of Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle came out with as much confidence as Draco could have wished for.

"Pansy Parkinson," Draco said patiently, and once the inspector had finished checking his list, gave him a cheeky little wink. The man stared at him flustered, and Draco beamed at him before skipping over to Harry to enter the Great Hall arm-in-arm.

The enchanted night sky of the Great Hall was thankfully unchanged. The gloriousness of so many lifted lit candles was undisturbed, and a part of Draco's heart still soared at the sight- for just a moment, until the sheer vulnerability of the four of them, hiding behind numbers and stolen faces, returned to his consciousness with vehemence.

The trek over to the Slytherin table seemed to last an eternity, though Draco forced himself not to hurry. It was not as natural as it had once been for him, after a year spent as a Ravenclaw, but he knew it to be far easier for him than the Gryffindors. It still felt like a walk on hot coals for Draco, turning his back on the high table, even if that high table did not seem, on first glance, to contain Voldemort.

Every second they walked felt like a moment someone could rise from their seats and denounce them, either a student or professor, somehow see through their Polyjuice and begin the mad dash to be the one to catch and deliver Harry Potter to the Dark Lord.

He found himself cravenly glad they had left the Horcrux with Luna.

Somehow, they made it to what Draco could easily pick out as their usual spots a bit down the Slytherin table. There would be no secret reassurances anymore, no whispers with their real names or anything likely to compromise them. This was the full act now, in front of a myriad of eyes that had to find them unimpeachable, whether friend or foe.

The tables filled out with differing numbers of students. Slytherin was the fullest, with no Muggleborns to have been displaced, and seemed indeed as packed as it had ever been. Gryffindor was notably depleted, though, as well as Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw to a lesser extent, the effect of anti-Muggleborn laws and the existence of Xaphan trimming away a sizable number of members from the three other houses.

Still, Seamus Finnigan of all people was there- put that down to his infamous mother- and all of the girls in their year in Gryffindor save Hermione and Parvati Patil, and Zacharias Smith over at Hufflepuff with other faces from Dumbledore's Army. Draco wondered if they had any idea what the year would hold in store for them under Death Eater control.

Draco turned towards the high table and found it an assortment of some familiar faces, but mainly strangers. With all of the Hogwarts professors disappeared to Xaphan or retired in safety, there were new hires everywhere, which should not have been as jarring as it was. It was ludicrous, after all, to think there would be only one witch or wizard in Britain competent to teach, say, Divination or Transfiguration, and the professors would thus be theoretically replaceable. Still, Draco was not the only head he saw turning to the high table more than usual in ill-concealed dismay upon his arrival to his seat, even Slytherins looking shaken to find Hogwarts staffed so differently than just last summer. If they had wanted to try and ignore the change here as much as possible, their teachers had not made it easy.

Particularly given the timid and fearful faces among these new professors, many of whom Draco would have put good money were not exactly taking up their posts of their own free volition. He had a place in himself to pity those new witches and wizards, who would likely have to face insufficient respect from their pupils along with all of their other ill-gotten challenges. One might have feared for the academic standards of Hogwarts. The world had fallen apart, after all, and yet one presumed these poor hostages and journeymen would still be responsible for successfully preparing their charges for their OWLs and NEWTs.

And, by the way, somehow shoving said NEWT-level material into the nincompoop head of Zacharias Smith.

Only Alecto Carrow up beside her brother looked fully arrogant about what the year would bring.

The professors all straightened and quieted when one of their own brought out the Sorting Hat, though the students only fully quieted once the hat began its yearly song. And what a song it was.

Oh, if the world was true and just

If every wizard knew himself

And every witch was one to trust

Then I would stay upon the shelf.

But yet we see the darkness rise

The death of all goodwill and cheer

And so before your tired eyes

The Hogwarts Sorting Hat is here.

Whatever lies the world abides

The Sorting Hat will always see

And so your House will be your prize

When you come forth, and put on Me.

Draco couldn't help but steal glances at the high table, where Carrow presided in theoretical total control. How would he be taking such obvious references to the dark state of the wizarding world? It almost surprised him no one had leapt down and set the hat alight for its affront. That was, if the message of the song was getting through to the Carrows' thick heads. They might well not catch the mutinous tone of the glorified piece of felt, or else not be listening very closely.

Will your house be Gryffindor

The final bastion of the brave

The house of chivalry in war

The values we must strive to save.

Or will you be in Hufflepuff

Where they still speak of loyalty

Just and patient, kind and tough

So rare for us today to see.

Or could you be a Ravenclaw

The mad and stupid fear your kind

They fear your searing wit with awe

They fear the truths your mind will find.

Yet still you might be Slytherin

Where only the sly survive

The cunning snake should always win

So come to Slytherin and thrive.

The time has come to put me on

And face with strength where you shall land

We soon all may be dead and gone

So put your fate within my hands.

The Sorting went as any Sorting did, students called in alphabetical order up to the front to face that recalcitrant dust-gatherer, the Sorting Hat. If the first-years all looked a little more fearful than usual, and if the cheers for each Sorting were more muted, well, you could put that down to a trick of perception. This was Hogwarts in its darkest days, a school full of children in the hand of sadists and madmen, and of course the mind apprehended everything as shadowed.

Yet Draco was sure he did not imagine himself and his friends giving some of the loudest cheers for the first one sorted Slytherin. It drew eyes to Draco, eyes he hadn't wanted, as their compatriots seemed possessed by tension, perhaps waiting for the other shoe to drop when Amycus Carrow finally spoke. Draco directed for their cheers that followed to be more gloomily muted, to suit the fashion of the hall.

The children sorted out roughly even to their four destinations. Finally, once every first-year was seated- there had been around twenty or twenty-five, hardly the usual abundance, but still bolstering the ranks of the houses- it was time for food, without a word from their new headmaster. The absence of any address lent a surreal air to the apparition of puddings and pumpkin juice.

The food appeared in place like it always did, with no sign of difficulty in its preparation by the house elves. Draco knew all of them save Wooky and Nissy had successfully fled Hogwarts during the battle, but he wasn't sure how many of those had stayed and taken up employment at Xaphan, or how many had gone back to their old master. The house elves here below them might have been returners, or they might have been new hires or diverted elves from private households, but whoever they were, they delivered the goods as seamlessly as ever. And of course so few would bother to think about the house elf situation at Hogwarts at all, or bother to question whose faces were behind the fare they began to attack with just as much gusto as any other year.

It was at least one of the best meals Draco had eaten in some time, give the mysterious house-elves that. He found himself tucking in perhaps more vociferously than Pansy would have, and quickly putting down his utensils when Daphne Greengrass began to speak to him.

It was farcical, the conversation that followed, with the Greengrass girls going on about the holidays they'd taken over the summer, and Draco forced to improvise a trip to France in

return, inspired by old holidays of his in the blue loop. Harry and the others were little help on this front, but Hermione's determined leadership of the three in rejoicing the absence of Mudbloods and blood traitors kept them occupied enough to keep up appearances. If Ron didn't add much to this ever-popular Slytherin topic, well, no one who knew Vince would expect him to say much when there was food in the vicinity anyway.

Blaise had never been much on all that Slytherin propaganda anyway, nor Greg so verbose, so Draco kicked Harry under the table. Harry misunderstood, leaning forward, and Draco gave him a brief peck to the lips, whispering as he did, "Just talk about the new professors." That was a topic they could all join in with real interest, Tracey Davis finding one of the terrified-looking new breed rather fit to boot.

It was impossible not to tense when the last dregs of the food disappeared and Amycus Carrow- Draco could not make himself think of him as the headmaster- rose from his central seat to address the school. There was some murmuring from Slytherin, but after some deathly stares leveled at the snakes, they too fell silent to await the words of the man who held their fate in his hands. They would perhaps have been more respectful right away if the headmaster they faced this year had still been Severus.

In any event, silence at last awaited Amycus Carrow, no doubt the most thoroughly mediocre man to have ever carried the title of Hogwarts headmaster- and perhaps the worst, if one discounted Phineas Black. "Welcome to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry," Carrow began, as if they didn't know where they were. "You have come to take part in a proud wizarding tradition of education. Hogwarts is a sacred place, part of our grand history, and all of you have been verified as pure enough to walk these hallowed halls."

The Blood Status tests, that was his reference. Draco hadn't expected him to be quite so on-the-nose in address, but really, what could you expect from a man who'd spent a year having to summon Professor McGonagall to answer the riddles to get him and his sister into Ravenclaw Tower?

"First-years are advised the Forbidden Forest is out of limits. Students are also advised that this year, Quidditch is canceled."

That sent a low murmur around the whole hall. Draco knew they had intended to start some form of Quidditch at Xaphan, in that clearing where they had held the wedding, so score one for the side of light.

"That's horrible," Astoria whispered across the table, brimming with visible indignation, and Draco shrugged insouciantly.

"What do you care?" he whispered back in Pansy's cutting manner. "They wouldn't have let us girls in anyway."

"Hogwarts was a school sadly under the process of degeneration with the past administration," Carrow went on forebodingly, sounding like he was quoting from some Death Eater handbook. "Undesirables were admitted to this school, and unthinkable liberties and perversions were permitted here. They will be longer. Students are expected to adhere to a strict standard of discipline from here forth, and to educate themselves on their proper

duties as witches and wizards in the new order. To assist in this understanding, we are proud to name my sister, Alecto Carrow, as professor of Muggle Studies."

Low murmurs, no doubt disturbed if not bleakly amused at what Muggle Studies was likely to constitute under the new administration, but quick in passing.

"We also welcome Geoffrey Whittaker to the post of Care of Magical Creatures professor..."

The segment of introducing the new professors stretched on for some length given the sheer quantity of them, leading to some concealed yawns all around. The only interest in it was when Carrow messed up the names, switching the Divination and Arithmancy professors around. Neither of the women had the courage to try and correct him, and if he had not caught his own mistake and corrected it, they would have been introduced to their students the first time by the wrong names.

"And finally," Carrow finished, casting his malevolent dark-eyed stare over the whole of the hall, "It has not escaped our attention that many of the empty seats at these tables should have been filled by missing students. Rest assured, these absences will not go unremarked... or unpunished. Every wizarding child in Britain will learn their proper duty at Hogwarts, and those who have not appeared... we are well aware where they are, and they will soon be returned to their rightful place. By any means necessary. Goodnight."

Draco cast a glance over Harry and Ron and Hermione, trying to summon the courage for what awaited him. Harry whispered in his ear, "You can do this, dragon," and that was what Draco needed, to face the prospect of what awaited him.

But first, it was time to launch into the execution of his duties as prefect- the only Slytherin prefect of his year, with Theo the missing one who indeed could not be salvaged as Carrow had promised for the lost. He remembered his time as prefect in the blue loop, and went along with the fifth and sixth-year prefects leading the wide-eyed new Slytherins down towards the dungeons.

Draco had no intention of setting foot in Slytherin house if he could help it. Nor would Harry, Ron, or Hermione, with Harry gone lurking to a prearranged hall with the cloak, and the Marauder's Map to warn him if anyone was approaching his position. Draco hated leaving Harry all alone, but it couldn't be helped according to Ron, and anyway it wouldn't be for that long. Ron and Hermione, for their part, were meant to scamper off to the Room of Requirement, to ensure the exit to the Hogs Head was still clear, and make alternate plans for their escape if it wasn't. They would keep their Dumbledore's Army coins out in case they were needed for assistance.

Finally, once Draco finished Pansy's prefect duties, he turned his face upwards, running Ron's plan over and over again in his head before advancing forward. They would have to be pitch-perfect, not a step out of place if they wanted to succeed, but so far, nothing had happened outside the plan, not a single thing-

"Pansy? Hello, Pansy, can I talk to you?"

Astoria Greengrass stood there in the corridor staring at her with a face like stone, waiting.

The Sword of Gryffindor

Chapter Notes

> Hey guys, it's totally okay to print out and bind copies of these books for individual use. I'd love to see pictures of them, or any other fanworks or the like for this series! They're wonderful :)
>
> And thanks so much for the comments, it really means a lot. I hope everyone enjoys <3

Astoria pulled Draco over to the side of the corridor, clearly having been waiting for him with some impatience. She also had a destination in mind, as she led Draco away from the portrait hole of Slytherin into the dungeon's labyrinthine paths that led to what had once been Severus's quarters. They didn't advance far towards the new Potions master's lodgings, though, just wedged themselves deep enough into the twists and turns to be sure there would be no one seeing or hearing them.

Draco reluctantly cast a Muffliato to that end, hardly wanting to delay their mission any longer than necessary, but seeing from the determination in Astoria's eyes that they would have to speak before he could be free of the girl.

"Pansy, I missed you," were the first words Astoria said, and to Draco's astonishment gave him a swift, surreptitious little hug before letting go. "I've been worried about you."

Why didn't you write me then was on the tip of Draco's tongue, before he remembered he had no idea whether Astoria actually had written to Pansy or not. "I've been wondering about you too," he said, confining any expression of sentiment to that, although from the surprise on Astoria's face, even that perhaps had been more than expected from Pansy to her.

"This is all so fucked up," Astoria said, the first time Draco had ever heard her swear. Maybe she did it more around other girls, or when she was truly driven to the brink like she seemed now, kneading her hands together before her small frame like she needed something to take hold of and could find nothing. "This- this *hostage school*."

"Hostage school?" Draco echoed, surprised out of his determination to shorten this interaction as much as possible, and Astoria nodded furtively but with conviction.

"They've got us all, and we're hostages for our parent's good behavior," Astoria said darkly, "And *we* had to come because they have our parents hostage for *our* obedience too, don't you know?"

"What, don't tell me you would have gone to Xaphan otherwise," Draco said, unable to think of anything but a joke in such unexpected tenseness. "I mean, maybe they'd have Quidditch,

but..."

"It's not funny!" Astoria exclaimed. "And you and everyone else is just carrying on like nothing's changed. Like no one's missing!" And there was likely the root of all this, avoid it as Draco intended to try. "But I guess *you* don't care, Pansy. All you want now is to marry Blaise and pump out a bunch of pureblooded babies for him. What does the rest of it matter to you?"

The real Pansy would never let a fifth-year speak to her like this, but Draco hardly wanted this to turn into an outright fight. "Sure," Draco said insouciantly, slouching back against the wall, "Why not," and Astoria cried out in frustration, wringing her small hands together again as if in frustrated prayer.

"What about Millie, then?" Astoria hissed. "Where's Millie, Pansy? Don't tell me you don't care about that."

Draco felt a sudden cold at the thought Pansy or one of the others might have shot off a note to Astoria, about their invitation to Bulstrode Manor that very morning. But that was surely paranoia speaking. "You don't understand anything about me and Millie, Astoria, so don't act like you do," Draco said testily. It was surprising, in a way, to hear that name coming with anguish from Astoria's lips. Draco had honestly assumed this would be an interrogation solely about Theo.

"I know you care about her, no matter what's happened," Astoria said defiantly. "And you heard what the headmaster said, about how they're going to deal with the students who *didn't* come. Doesn't that scare you? Where is she, Pansy?"

"She's at that other school, alright?" Draco blurted, not sure how else to deal with the pressure. "She's with the other side now, Astoria, so you'd do well to avoid ever speaking her name again if you know what's good for you-"

"What does it matter, what side she's on?" Astoria interrupted doggedly. "It's *Millie.*"

"It's all that matters, you stupid little girl," Draco spat out, wondering if that was harsh enough now to fit a challenged Pansy, but it certainly wasn't enough to put Astoria off.

"I just want to know where everyone's gone," Astoria said sorrowfully. "You can't tell me Theo's gone to that other school too."

And there it was, what Draco had been waiting for and fearing more than anything. "Why are you asking me of all people? What would I know about Theo? What should I care?"

Astoria actually lowered her voice despite the spell isolating them, as if what she was about to say was so taboo. "We were the Chasers, Pansy. The three of us. You and me and him, for the Kingsnakes. That was the best time of my life. And I think it was the best time of yours too. So you can pretend, but you can't tell me you don't remember. And you can't tell me you don't care about where Theo is. I don't believe you haven't at least tried to find out where he just disappeared-"

"Shut up, Astoria, leave this to the grown-ups," Draco snapped, but Astoria was unshaken.

"I know you were plotting something with him," Astoria insisted, stepping closer to Draco in clear challenge. "You and him, you would go off and whisper, the second half of last year, you were up to something, and he wouldn't tell me what. I would have been jealous if you didn't have Blaise, and if I didn't know your old house elves were involved. I *saw* you take him to meet with them once, Pansy, I'm not just a child, I know you knew something about what he was planning-"

"Who says Theo was planning anything?" Draco threw out, desperate to put a spanner in the works, as Astoria's insistence began to pick up pace.

"I knew he was because I was involved," Astoria said impatiently. "I helped him dig up this bird from the Hogwarts graveyard on Valentine's Day. This rotting old bird, and he wouldn't even tell me why, on *Valentine's Day*, and he cried after, and I just held him. I never even asked why, that's how much I loved him, Pansy, except now I think maybe I should have asked, because it's like he's just disappeared off the face of the earth-"

"Astoria, stop-"

"Is he dead, Pansy?" Astoria yelled. "Please, please, will you just tell me that- will someone just tell me the truth-" Tears were coming to her eyes, staring up at Draco with pure, unbridled terror for the one she still seemed to love, and Draco broke.

"Yes!" Draco sobbed out, tears in his own eyes now too, much as he tried to wish them away. "Yes, Astoria, Theo is dead!"

Astoria didn't look surprised, or even as hurt as one might have thought. "I was already sure he was," she said quietly, almost numbly. "But it- it's good to have someone finally tell me. Tell me the truth."

"I'm sorry, Astoria," Draco cried, wiping at his eyes and finding the tears still streaming out, ugly and messy. "I'm so, so sorry."

"Why are *you* crying?" Astoria asked, peering at Draco bleakly. "You didn't love him."

But I did, Astoria. I did. "I'm just- sorry to have to be the one to tell you," Draco hedged, and Astoria heaved a long sigh.

"Do you know what happened to him?" she asked hopelessly, and Draco's heart ached for this fifteen-year-old girl, taking so bravely the news that the only boy she had ever loved was forever gone to her. He didn't know why *he* couldn't stop crying.

"The plot we had- he didn't tell me much, but I know he was after Draco Black-"

"You mean Draco Malfoy," Astoria interrupted, a strange look on her face. "You always still call him Draco Malfoy."

Was that doubt on her face of whom she was really speaking to? Draco's hysterical insides took another step closer to utter breakdown. "I don't know, Astoria, he was after that person,

so if he's disappeared, I would bet that they fought and Draco's won..."

"Pansy, are you alright?" Astoria said with what sounded real concern, stepping close and taking out her handkerchief to wipe at Draco's tears. "I'm sorry I made you cry. I never knew he meant *that* much to you."

"Astoria, I'm sorry," Draco said, hardly knowing what he was saying anymore. "I wish he hadn't had to die. There was no other way."

Astoria's face paled. "What are you talking about, Pansy? What do you mean?" She took back her handkerchief, and Draco drew his wand to dry it for her.

"Here, I'll-"

"No!" Astoria screeched, jumping back as if she'd just seen Theo come back to life before her eyes, but there was far too much terror for that. "NO!"

Her eyes had fallen to what, after all, was the talon wand.

"You're not Pansy," Astoria said with terror in her eyes, taking a shaky step backward. "You're not. You're- you're- you killed-"

"I'm not," Draco said emptily, but there was no hiding what she'd seen. The talon wand spoke for itself, and she knew it clearly. There was no escaping this now.

"Help! HELP!" Astoria yelled, turning to try and run, but no one could hear over the Muffliato Draco had cast, and Draco caught her by her slender arm before she could escape their nook of the labyrinth. "Are you going to kill me too?"

"No, Astoria," Draco said, another tear running down his cheek. "Of course I'm not going to kill you."

"Why did you kill him?" Astoria breathed, and there was nothing but the truth left.

"He tried to kill me," Draco said, simple and insufficient. "Obliviate!"

"Where have you been?" Harry hissed, nearly giving Draco a heart attack with his invisibility cloak on to shield him from view. "I've been waiting here so long-"

"It was nothing," Draco lied tersely, glad he'd taken the time to spell away the evidence of his tears off Pansy's face. "I'm here now, alright? Now are you going to throw a fit at me, or are we going to steal this sword?"

Harry falling into line silently behind him, back on to the plan, told him everything he needed to know about the priorities there.

Draco only had to do a couple of sets of Pansy's coquettish little knock before the headmaster's office was opened to him, by the man himself. "What do you want?" Amycus

Carrow growled, only for his eyes to focus on Draco and grow... not less hostile, per se, but more intrigued for sure. He clearly registered the green Slytherin tie. What else he took in about Draco was yet to be determined. "Oh, it's one of the students. Don't you know it's past curfew, little girl?"

It wouldn't have been, if it hadn't been for Astoria, but Draco pushed that guilty annoyance aside.

"I'm a prefect, sir," Draco said instead, tilting his chest to show off the small P badge there and give Carrow a good excuse to get an eyeful of everything surrounding it. "I'm meant to be out in the corridors patrolling."

"And now you've come to patrol in my office! Do you detect any dangers?"

Carrow made his little remark with a frankly baffling attempt at humor, so much so that Draco almost boggled at him before he remembered himself. Was this the difference in even the most evil men in dealing with a fellow Death Eater versus a pretty young girl? It seemed an advantage, though, not to be taken seriously, by an old sadist like this.

"I had some difficulties, actually, which I think only you could resolve for me, headmaster," Draco simpered, and Carrow only eyed him up and down once before letting him into his office. Draco had been half-ready to draw his wand and stun his way in, but it was that easy so far.

He let the door hang open behind him enough that he felt the brush of Harry in his cloak slipping in behind him. So far, they were running late still, but otherwise, back to plan again.

"Difficulties," Carrow echoed as he settled at his desk and Draco in the chair facing it. It was all Draco could do not to stare at the office around him, though, instead of the man who was nominal master of all of it. It was in some ways a hideous thing how very unchanged it was, from the days when Draco had come here to blackmail Dumbledore, but Draco didn't know what he'd expected. Dark hangings and cobwebs? Mottled bloodstains?'

"It's about your speech, really, headmaster," Draco said earnestly, leaning forward to once more put Pansy's cleavage at its best angle. He noticed Carrow kept casting glances at it, though he at least had the grace so far not to do so blatantly. That left him trying to look away, and Draco trying *not* to look away, his thoughts all bound up with the sword.

"My speech," Carrow echoed in the tone that passed as thoughtful for his logically impaired brain. "Your name, girl?"

"Pansy Parkinson," Draco said promptly, putting pride and a modicum of pushiness into his borrowed voice. "I'm a pureblood Slytherin."

"A good pureblood girl, is it?" Carrow said, eyes focusing on Draco all the more. "Have you detected in our school some *lapse* in purity that you need to bring to my attention?"

Merlin. The man was practically slavering, not at Pansy's tits now but at the thought of some violation of his standards that he could punish with chains and Cruciatus on children. What a

filthy man to need something from.

"In a manner of speaking, sir," Draco said earnestly, though Carrow in truth couldn't be further off base. "You spoke of those who were missing, and how they would be caught and brought back. I was wondering about one of the students I know is missing. It's my best friend, sir, a pureblood girl called Millicent Bulstrode. I wondered if you knew anything of her."

Carrow's disappointment was transparent, now that the prospect of knocking heads and taking names was no longer immediately on the horizon. What a macabre old troglodyte.

"Ah, yes, Miss Bulstrode," he said, quite obviously having no idea who that was. "Of course we know all about Miss Bulstrode. But I'm afraid that's classified information I can't share with you."

"Oh," Draco said, making his voice sound crushed, though he was in truth glad not to be drawn into a long conversation on his cover story. "I understand, headmaster. It's an honor just to be admitted to your office," he said, putting it on as thick as he chose. "I've never been in here before."

"Have you not?" Carrow said, and rose to his feet to gesture about grandly, as if he'd personally outfitted the place to its current resplendence. "See, here are all of the old headmasters of Hogwarts," he said proudly, indicating the wall of portraits stuffily. "The tradition I spoke of tonight is embodied in these faces. Even if some of them left... some things to be desired." And even if Phineas Black happened for some strange reason to be missing.

"Of course I never came here before," Draco said, as if offended. "I would never have let myself be alone with that dirty old man Dumbledore. That perverted old blood traitor?"

His eyes focused on the wall, and he couldn't help but let out a low sound of astonishment, at one thing that *was* changed from the blue loop with Snape. "I'm glad to see his portrait isn't up here with the others," he made himself say mildly.

He remembered Harry standing there invisibly, and thought how Harry must feel at the omission. He hoped Harry would understand how very much Draco was playing a role here, if not the role itself so precisely- not so much Pansy anymore, since Carrow didn't know Pansy, but half bogus Death Eater dream girl, and half very much his old blue loop self.

"Of course not," Carrow blustered, looking pleased Draco had noticed. "You have a keen eye, Miss Parkinson. That blood traitor will be wiped from the annals of Hogwarts, an aberration never to be spoken of again." Somehow, Harry where he hovered behind Draco managed to hold back an indignant sound at that. "But I see your eye has been drawn elsewhere. What do you think of the sword?"

Draco's eye had traveled inevitably, of course, to the Sword of Gryffindor, placed in a glass box for presumed safekeeping up on the wall. Draco's fingers itched to draw the talon wand and take care of Carrow, then shatter the glass and abscond with Harry and the sword. But

there was no telling what protections there might be on the glass. Better to get Carrow to get it down to show him, if he could manage it.

"It's so golden," Draco exclaimed, clasping his hands together girlishly, "It's so impressive, headmaster," and watched Carrow smirk to himself at that praise, as if he alone was responsible for the Sword of bloody Gryffindor. "I can't see it very well, though," Draco confined himself to adding, rather than overtly asking to have it in his hands yet.

"Come here, girl," Carrow said gruffly, and Draco crossed that ineffable barrier between this side of the desk and Carrow's. He managed not to tense in disgust when Carrow's arm encircled his shoulders, ostensibly to show him the sword up high from closer. He pointed to it as if Draco could miss it. "What do you think? There are benefits to being headmaster, aren't there?" Like possessing such mystical artifacts, his voice seemed to imply, as if he would even know what to do with the thing. He'd probably end up stabbing himself somewhere choice with it.

Nor was there any compunction to brag of a relic of *Gryffindor* of all people. Draco half-suspected the lout didn't even know who the sword had once belonged to.

"I wish I could touch it, sir," Draco purred out, afraid he was putting it on too thick now, but it was about time they got this show on the road. "I just want to run my hands over the hilt and feel it."

Give this to the old pervert, he didn't even hesitate after that. "Let's see it, then," he said gleefully, and lifted his wand. The glass slid open for him. "This case is mine as headmaster," he boasted. "It will only open for me, it's got all kinds of protections on it."

"There goes my sinister attempts to steal it," Draco deadpanned before he could stop himself.

Carrow looked startled for a moment, then laughed aloud as if charmed. As if finding some rare romantic sympathy between himself and the *seventeen-year-old student.* "Clever girl," he said appreciatively, and gave Draco's shoulders another lascivious squeeze before letting go to finish retrieving the sword.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked, and took the sword by the hilt and held it out in the light for Draco to see. When Draco came closer to examine the thing- it sure looked like the Sword of Gryffindor, which *Draco* should have been in possession of in the first place- he felt Carrow's free hand go to his waist, without even a pretext. Perhaps that was the payment for getting to see the sword up close and personal: getting up close and personal with this perverted worm.

"It's beautiful," Draco said, waiting only for Carrow to put it in his hands, and then he could use his magic to take Carrow out of the equation. He was so close now, but he couldn't risk Carrow slipping when cursed and cutting himself badly. Otherwise, he would have Stunned the man the moment the sword came out of the case. "Do you think I could hold it too, headmaster?"

He asked in his most breathless sexpot voice, but Carrow seemed to be enjoying showing off the sword in his own hand too much to yield it yet. Or perhaps it was the progress of that free

hand he was enjoying, which had gone down from Draco's waist to his hip, where it slid before it finally settled to squeeze down on the strip of bare skin between the high socks and skirt. "Do you *like* to hold swords, Miss Parkinson?" Carrow asked in the most insinuating voice imaginable, and Draco swallowed back his disgust.

"Oh, yes," Draco said, although he had a sinking feeling it wasn't the Sword of Gryffindor that Carrow was talking about anymore.

"I have a finer sword for you to hold onto than this," Carrow boasted, brandishing the Sword of Gryffindor for his own cringe-worthy analogy, and Draco could only pity any real student of his who might find themselves in this situation. Draco tried to squirm away from his pawing hand, but that just made Carrow draw it up higher, under the skirt-

And then Carrow crumpled like a puppet with its strings cut, and Harry had flung off the cloak, with Blaise's dark eyes blazing with Harry's wand extended forward like the very personification of affronted justice. Draco just managed to snatch away the Sword of Gryffindor as the man fell to the ground, so it only sliced across Carrow's palm before he had it and Carrow was hitting the floor.

"You absolute plonker!" Draco screamed at Harry the moment the sword was secured, holding it with both hands almost like he wielded it against him. "You were only supposed to intervene if something went wrong!"

"What are you talking about?" Harry said, baffled, looking as if he'd expected congratulations for his heroic intervention. "He had his hands all over you-"

"I had it under control!" Draco protested, and grabbed Carrow's Stunned form and held up his bleeding palm like an accusation. "Look! He cut himself!"

"Oh, no," said Harry, in a voice that hardly seemed to partake in the seriousness of the situation.

"And it could have been far worse if I hadn't gotten the sword from him before he fell on it!" Draco exclaimed, feeling his blood boil at Harry's obtuseness. "Look, why do you *think* I wasn't doing anything? What would we have done if he'd hurt himself badly? We're not on a mission to assassinate the headmaster-"

"So what was I supposed to do, just stand there and let him grope you-" Harry retorted heatedly, and Draco had the surreal urge to slam him in his perfect teeth with the hilt of the Sword of Gryffindor.

"You and your bloody jealousy? Are you serious? You've *dumped* me and we still haven't gotten well rid of *that*? Damn it, Harry, the *risk* you just took, and all for-"

"It's not that!" Harry yelled back, cloak hanging from his free hand like an invitation to go that Draco should have been taking, not screaming at his ally and tempting fate, but Draco couldn't remember the last time he had been this angry. "Forgive me if I thought you wouldn't want to be pawed over by that monster!"

"So it's Harry Potter, come to save the day, then?" Draco screeched. "Bloody hell, I should have just sent you to the Room of Requirement with the others and done this part myself-"

"Not bloody likely-"

"Fine! Forget it! Just- do you have the Marauder's Map? Is anyone coming? His sister?"

"No one!" Harry yelled after checking, as if this was another insult to deal out. Draco seethed while he took out the talon wand and cast Incarcerous on Carrow, binding him where he'd fallen to the legs of his chair, bleeding hand and all.

"Fine, let's go!" Draco snapped, and Harry just eyed him back with his jaw set stubbornly in the exact way it always did at times like this, visible even with Blaise's different features, and now Draco was torn between kicking him and kissing him.

"Yeah, let's go!" Harry snapped back, and offered the cloak to Draco. Draco slid under it with him, with just room enough for the two of them to share. It threw them into close proximity, which hardly helped with either the kicking or the kissing instincts. "Do you want to hold the sword, or should I?"

"I'll hold the Sword of Gryffindor!" Draco exclaimed, since, after all, the thing had been supposed to be his. He picked it up where it had lain on the desk, nearly forgotten in truth during Harry and Draco's spat, and concealed it under the invisibility cloak with them.

One edge of it held the slight sheen of red blood across it. At least they'd learned the thing was still sharp.

"Where have you been?" was the first thing Ron bellowed at them, as the Room of Requirement opened to let them inside, and the cloak came off to show them sprinting in together as fast as they could.

"Getting this!" Draco cried out, holding up the sword, and Ron finally looked up from his watch then, gaping at the shiny old thing. Hermione, though, still looked wracked with the anxiety of waiting and deviating from the plan, even as her derelict friends and their prize arrived before her.

"Good! Good job!" Ron yelled, somewhat unsteadily, then jerked his head towards the other end of the Room of Requirement. They'd told it they needed to see Ron and Hermione, and found themselves in the Room of Hidden Things, all of the ghostly abandoned objects looming like forgotten gargoyles in their piles. "It's still clear! We can get out by the Hogs Head!"

"Where were you?" Hermione couldn't help but ask as they wished for a way out of Hogwarts and watched it open before them. "What kept you so late?"

"I don't know," Harry called fitfully, stepping into the passage and beginning to make his way down the shadowed steps. "Draco?"

Draco hadn't wanted to go into this with the others, let alone before they had finished their mission and were safely away from Hogwarts with their quarry. "Unscheduled delay," he said tersely. "Just leave it for now, alright?"

"That's it," Hermione marveled, staring as she tried to focus on their way through the passage, looking captivated by the sword. "That's the Sword of Gryffindor."

"And we should be able to use it to destroy that godforsaken locket," Draco agreed.

All of their attention was focused around the blade Draco wielded as they made their way down the passage. It helped focus them away from the fact that they were still not done out and away yet. What they had taken on had been incredibly risky and reckless, after all, and it seemed unthinkable it could all go this smoothly other than the unplanned delay. Could it possibly, Draco wondered, be as simple as this to rob Voldemort's Hogwarts?

Maybe the adage was true that an enterprise was only as good as its employees.

It was good they had a simple way out according to Ron and Hermione, because the Polyjuice was beginning to wear off for all of them. Ron and Hermione's clothes were beginning to become baggy, and Draco's loose in places and uncomfortably constricting in others. Draco could feel his skin began to expand and tighten, nearly making him fall over his own feet as those feet grew in their suddenly too-tight shoes.

But they made it into the Hogs Head unscathed, and the Sword of Gryffindor was with them.

They Apparated into the entrance hall of Bulstrode Manor together as themselves, breathing hard with exertion. No one was breathing harder than Draco, from sheer exhilaration. It was finally sinking in what they had just accomplished. He was flying wildly between extremes tonight, from sobbing guilt to anger to now this ultimate joy over the sword. But joy it was, and made all the stronger by the fact that Harry remained with him, staring at Draco and the sword in his hand, while Ron and Hermione advanced down the hall to begin dealing with their captives.

Draco didn't want to think about them yet, didn't want to come down off this intoxicating new high of success, even when he heard Ron and Hermione making indistinct surprised noises, at a distance that felt somehow already very far away. It was just him and Harry here, and the unexpected adoration in Harry's eyes. It doubled as Draco made a show of holding up the Sword of Gryffindor, letting it catch the light in its unspoiled red and gold.

"You did it, dragon," Harry breathed, and Draco shook his head, taking a step closer, licking his lips.

"We did it," Draco corrected idly, hardly caring about the distinction, all of his attention fixed on Harry and those killer green eyes fixed on him. Harry breathed in hard, staring at Draco like the best thing he had ever seen when wielding this sword, and that was it. Draco's fragile self-control, whatever remained of it after everything, broke apart completely, and he seized Harry by his Slytherin tie and kissed him.

The rush of it was immediate, the contact with such soft and beloved and perfect lips, but all the more so when Harry didn't instantly push him away like the rational part of Draco had been expecting. Harry's lips parted instead, open to Draco's ministrations, and Draco took full advantage, pouring all of his excitement into the kiss, all of his disbelief that they had actually gotten the sword that hang from the hand that wasn't touching Harry. Then Harry began to kiss Draco back, and the sword fell to the floor unnoticed.

Harry took control of the kiss without opposition, lips sweeping in with an undeniable force to them that had Draco's pulse peaking and his heart soaring. Harry was just as all-absorbing a kisser as Draco had remembered, as thorough and unrelenting in the way he took Draco's lips and made them his own, and he was making them his own completely now. Draco moaned into the kiss and heard Harry moan back before deepening it, tongue sliding between Draco's lips and teasing there, and Draco's knees started to feel weak, hardly capable of holding him up under the circumstances.

Draco felt his back hit the wall of the entrance hall, Harry's hands guiding him backwards and settling on his waist once they had him there. He kissed back enthusiastically, swept away in the wave of Harry's pent-up passion, feeling he had hardly suspected Harry still held for him at all, but there it was, palpable and undeniable. There was the same possessiveness there he remembered, the unshakable desire to make sure Draco was his and no one else's, and Draco felt he never could want anything else in his life but Harry, but this...

"Harry? Draco?" Ron's voice carried out to them, and Draco ignored it. So did Harry, whose grip on Draco just tightened, as if worried an outside force would pull Draco away from him, but Draco had no intention of letting it-

"Oh, for Merlin's sake," Millie yelled, and stomped into the entrance hall and bodily dragged Harry off Draco, with the energetic leap of a Keeper making a stop at the height of a match.

Harry made protesting sounds, as did Draco, but once they came back to themselves, they found they were being watched not just by Millie but all of the others. And those watching faces had immeasurably grave looks on them, low enough to make the soaring sensation of kissing Harry dissipate more rapidly than Draco would have thought it could. "What is it, Mills? What's wrong?"

"What's *wrong*?" Millie growled, voice coming out low and rough. "Why don't you try and detach yourself from Harry Potter's dick for once long enough to take a look around?"

Draco tried to obey, however insulting the phrasing, and what faced him did throw him. The great glass chandelier he always associated with Bulstrode Manor was fallen, capsized down onto the ancestral carpets and in many places shattered. The broken glass announced as nothing else could that in their absence, something had gone wrong.

"What is it, what's going on?" Harry asked, snapped right away into heroic Gryffindor mode, and strode forward towards the others, leaving Draco scrambling to follow. Broken glass crunched under their shoes.

There were scorch marks on the walls, along with dents and indentations that marked clear evidence of a struggle. What was most distressing, though, was the sheer quantity of fresh

blood underfoot, soaked into the broken glass.

"What happened?" Harry demanded, and Ron and Hermione looked anxiously at Millie, Ginny, and Luna-

Neville wasn't there. He was missing.

"Where's Neville?" Draco asked, dreading the answer already, and Luna burst into tears.

The story all came out then, as Luna was led by a comforting Hermione into the sitting room- a sitting room with its captive Slytherins absent. Ron stared at the empty room with horror, until Millie nudged him roughly inside, and the others followed, taking their dazed seats on the couches. Draco stayed standing, fighting the urge to pace as all the nervous energy and anger returned.

"They'd all woken up. Pansy was having a seizure," Ginny began, "Or so we thought. It's the oldest trick in the book, but she was really good at pretending, and..."

"And I was worried and stupid enough to open the door, and take the others in to help her," Millie filled in grimly. "You might as well say it, Ginny. I was worried for my best friend, and it was my bloody fault."

"It wasn't!" Ginny protested. "It could have happened to anyone!"

"She got Ginny with her ropes," Luna said softly, "And threatened to choke her, unless we untied them and gave back their wands. I didn't know what else to do. None of us did. We were just waiting for the moment she let go of Ginny, and then I thought we could get them back under control again. I thought. It just- it didn't work that way."

"Blaise cast this smoke spell, and then it was chaos," Millie went on, shaking her head. "Ginny got free of Pansy and started to duel her, and I was dueling Vince- at least I think it was Vince- but I couldn't keep track of anything, and the four of them started running- they went right out into the hall, and Greg, he-"

"Goyle brought down the chandelier," Luna gasped through her tears, and Draco went to her other side to hold her shoulder, insufficient as it felt. "It fell right on Neville. He went down hard, there was so much blood, he was covered in it, I think he passed out, he collapsed..."

"And they took Neville and ran," Millie finished. "They grabbed his body and they ran with it. The chandelier was between us, and it delayed us just long enough. They Disapparated and that was that. They were gone."

"Why would they take Neville? Why not just leave him?" Hermione said disbelievingly, and Millie shot her a vicious look, wrapping her arms around herself before Ginny came over and rested her chin on her slumped shoulder.

"Isn't it obvious?" Millie spat. "When they have to go back to Hogwarts and tell their story to the Death Eaters, tell how bad they fucked up, at least they won't be coming back empty-handed. They'll have something to show for it, at least."

"What's going to happen to him?" Luna cried, and burst into incoherent sobs. When Draco looked into her tear-swollen eyes, he could not tell if those tears blamed him. He didn't think so, but he had the sinking feeling that perhaps they should.

"I don't know," Millie said. "All I know is they got away, and they took Neville's body with them."

The Sword Falls

Chapter Notes

> Hey, everyone! I'm going to try to get back to posting more often. Hope you all enjoy this chapter! <3

"Who's going to do it?" asked Ron, and Harry stepped forward, taking the Sword of Gryffindor from Draco's numb hands. It gleamed of gold and crimson, which suited Harry so well, and there it was, finally wielded in Harry's hands where it belonged.

"I'll do it," said Harry, while the others looked at him apprehensively.

"Be careful, Harry," Hermione cautioned. "We don't know if the Horcrux might respond or even come alive when you try to destroy it."

"I'll be careful," Harry promised, and Draco took the locket Luna had given back to him off his neck. He could only shudder, thinking of what could have happened if Luna had given the locket to Neville to wear as he'd suggested. But it was there back with them, and ready after everything they'd been through to finally get obliterated.

Harry led the others outside the tent together, holding the sword high in one hand and the locket in the other. Draco followed him closely, trying not to think about what it had cost to put that sword in Harry's grasp.

Draco put Neville from his mind forcibly as their wands cast Lumos above the locket when Harry dropped it to the ground. It set an eerie glow about the clearing, as seemed only right for an event as momentous as the destruction about to occur tonight. The final shattering of a piece of Voldemort, one step closer to ending the noseless menace once and for all, and here they were, privileged enough to witness it as the ones at Harry's side.

Harry raised the sword, glimmering reflections of the gold and garnet showing off the blade from the flickering light of the fire. Draco held his breath, ready for anything, as sure as anything in that moment that whatever was to come, he believed in Harry Potter.

The blade came down upon the rounded oval of the locket and struck it true, a smashing sound that made Draco inwardly pump a fist in triumph. Except when Harry withdrew the sword and Draco could see where the talon wand lit, there was the infernal locket, unhurt as ever before.

"No," Hermione breathed, the only sound in the clearing save the night noises of the forest, and the Sword of Gryffindor coming clacking down again. Once more it impacted, sending the locket jumping with it across the dirt, but once more the blade pulled back to show the

locket still unopened, and in a pristine enough state to be sold at one of the more upmarket establishments in Knockturn Alley.

Draco started to laugh. Ron leapt forward and snatched the sword out of Harry's hand. "Give it to me," said Ron, and crouched to smash the sharp end of the sword squarely onto the smooth firelit face of the locket. By now, Draco wasn't expecting anything different than what ensued: nothing. Ron might as well have been running face-first into a brick wall.

"It's not working, we must be doing something wrong," said Ron, while Hermione took a step back from them, wand unlighting and sliding into her pocket as both her hands went to her mouth in horror. "Draco, Dumbledore left you the sword- maybe- if you're the one-"

Draco stifled a hysterical giggle and took the sword from Ron. He put his all into the blow he leveled on the locket from above, even as he knew it would have no more effect than all the other times he'd tried to destroy this cursed thing and came up wanting. He still slashed the sword down twice more for Ron's expectant gaze, while Hermione made a sniffling sound, and Harry went back to comfort her. "Oh, it can't be, it's too terrible- if we did all of this for nothing," Draco heard her say, with one hell of a sinking heart, but Ron at least was outwardly undaunted.

"Come on, 'Mione, why don't you give it a try too," Ron coaxed her, and Draco held it out for her tepidly. She didn't take it, hands grasped fitfully onto Harry's shoulders. "Fine," said Ron, taking the blade back himself to resume his efforts. "Maybe we just haven't done it enough times," he went, grunting with exertion, and Draco approached Harry and Hermione with his heart in his throat now. *This was my idea,* he realized with ruthless clarity, simple as the full moon above them that filled the clearing with its clouded light. *This was my idea. Which makes it my fault.*

Hermione reached out an arm and dragged Draco in to embrace her other side, to the sound all the while of Ron uselessly slamming the sword down into the locket.

Draco was woken the next morning by Hermione gently shaking him where he lay. Squinting his eyes open revealed he'd somehow slept through the others rising, and now Hermione was telling him he had to get up and face the day. He rolled over in his sleeping bag, burying the side of his face in his pillow like an ostrich's head entrenched in the sand. He ignored Hermione until she finally went away, leaving him still lying there prone and unenthused. *Face the day.* As it happened, he couldn't. He couldn't bear the thought of getting up and facing the others again after the mistake he'd made.

It wasn't long, though, before someone else came into the tent to prod and pry at him. This one was harder for him to ignore: Harry, the one person he'd most keenly let down, except perhaps for Luna. Harry crawled over to sit beside him, reaching down to lightly touch his shoulder through the sleeping bag.

"Are you awake?" Harry asked, more gently than Draco deserved.

Draco rolled over to face Harry and accomplished the grand labor of peeling his eyes open. "Unfortunately. What?"

"Hermione said you wouldn't get out of bed," Harry said nervously, only to stammer at Draco's baleful glare. "Which- I was going to say is a good thing, since I need to talk to you. Alone. Did you sleep badly? I couldn't sleep."

If Harry wanted to read Draco the riot act for their colossal Draco-led failure, he could try it, and enjoy the dragon biting his bloody head off. Or, as Draco knew was far more likely, the dragon listening cowed in utter shame, and only waiting for Harry to leave before having an absolute breakdown. That was possible too.

"I couldn't sleep last night," Harry confessed, in a low enough tone to make Draco sit up at last, to hear him properly. "I really couldn't. Practically the whole night I was lying awake."

"What," Draco said caustically. "Is it that our- that is, my- foolhardy plan got one of our friends captured, and we have no earthly way of getting back in to Hogwarts to save him? Or is it that said foolhardy plan was about as successful as Ron asking Fleur Delacour to the Yule Ball, and we're still not one bit closer to accomplishing Dumbledore's mission, upon which rests, I don't know, the fate of the whole universe? Yeah, I'd get it if you can't sleep."

Harry's cautious face leaned a bit closer in the filtered light of morning, a ray of sun that cut through a seam hitting eyes and illuminating them as unfairly green as ever. "No," Harry said softly. "It wasn't all that. It probably should have been, but it wasn't. Draco, my mind wouldn't stop racing- my *heart* wouldn't stop-"

"Why?" Draco breathed, mouth gone dry, and watched Harry clear his throat, looking almost as miserable as he looked- hopeful?

"Because all night, I couldn't stop thinking about how you kissed me," Harry said all in a rush. "And yes, I know there's so much going on. I'm a terrible person, but, dragon- all I could think about was you-"

A warm feeling suffused Draco's chest, so strong it was almost suffocating. But he forced himself to be circumspect, in case he was somehow misunderstanding. "I thought you were through with me."

Harry leaned closer yet, face astonishing in its guileless beauty. "I don't think I'll ever be through with you, Draco, not really. I was wrong. I can't be, I just can't- I'm sorry-"

"What are you saying?" Draco breathed, but he dared enough to reach out and touch one of Harry's hands, where it awkwardly hung in the air, seeming to want to touch while lacking the daring. Draco encircled that hand in his own, and Harry didn't stop him.

"I'm saying I can't stay away from you, Draco," Harry said wildly, almost desperately, eyes locking together so firmly it was like he wished it was their lips. "I never could, and I never will..."

"What about all the lies I've told?" Draco asked, heart pounding in his ears deafeningly. The warm suffocating feeling wasn't going away, what he was starting to recognize as need. "What about all the things I've done?"

"It doesn't matter," Harry groaned, looking to nearly vibrate from the effort it took to keep the two of them apart. Draco knew the feeling. "I just need you too much."

"You love me too much," Draco finished for him, and Harry's chest heaved with a great sigh, as if all was revealed now.

"Yes," Harry said quietly, "Yes, I do," staring down at their joined hands- until he let out a gasp, when Draco used his free hand to take Harry by the chin, and tilt his gaze back up to his.

"So you wouldn't mind, then," Draco said slowly, "If I did this," and leaned forward, taking Harry's face in both hands. Harry exhaled sharply but didn't move away, so Draco leaned forward the rest of the way and kissed him.

Kissing Harry felt as natural as it ever had, the hot melting feeling between their lips back again. Draco leaned into it, greedy for more of that contact, and a thrill went straight through him as Harry began to kiss him back, first hesitantly and then with fire on his lips. Draco sighed into the kiss and let Harry take control with unabashed fervor, building with the giddy thought, *He still wants me. He actually still wants me.*

The taste of being wanted so much by Harry sent him moaning into the kiss, pouring himself into it, needy for more of that taste- and the smell, that Amortentia-scented rush from Harry's closeness. It was a scent like no other, down to the singed golden haze at the ends of pure unadulterated power. Draco kissed Harry and could feel the power of it, Harry's power, and all of his failure was dropping out of his consciousness, replaced by pure selfish need.

"Harry," Draco whined against Harry's mouth, "Touch me," and Harry lifted Draco the rest of the way out of his sleeping bag, where he settled Draco's weight exactly where it belonged. Harry's body beneath him was a shock all over, the lean muscle and constrained strength just waiting to be let loose.

"I love you," Draco whispered, and Harry kissed him so hard the world reeled around him, leaving him lightheaded, ears practically ringing. Draco didn't know what was wrong with himself, to be so affected so quickly, to want so hard so much- except maybe it was the weight of Neville and the undamaged locket threatening at him, the sheer depth and breadth of how very badly Draco wanted to forget for that moment. And Harry could make him forget no matter how heavy his unworthiness fell upon him, could turn him dizzy and hazy and senseless to all but Harry, if Draco could just get that stiff weight pressing up against him inside of him...

"Harry," Draco said, breaking off the kiss to speak distinctly. "Do you love me?"

"Yes," Harry said unhesitatingly. "Yes, I do."

Draco leaned forward and breathed into Harry's ear, "Then help me forget."

It took some time afterwards for them to get cleaned up and presentable, only for them to come out and find Ron and Hermione flushed and studiously avoiding their gazes. It took Draco longer than it should have to realize that they'd forgotten the Muffliato.

"So," Ron said with an embarrassed smile. "Either there was a walrus dying in our tent, or you two are back together?"

"Until the end of the war," Draco said without thinking, and Harry's hand turned in his quizzically.

"And after that too, I hope," Harry said, and Draco laughed and played it off like he'd misspoke, even though the pain of it could have brought him tumbling to his knees. *I'm sorry, Harry. There won't be an after the war for me.*

That night saw them gathered around the fire, discussing next steps, while all the while wondering just why the Sword of Gryffindor hadn't worked. Draco offered to go chuck the defective thing into the nearest forest lake, and received three disappointed stares. Well, he supposed it was the Sword of *Gryffindor.*

Eventually, when they got tired of fruitless plotting, Draco had Hermione get out one of the Muggle Studies books she'd somehow seen fit to bring, a copy of one of Shakespeare's problem plays. Soon, Hermione was reading from *The Tempest* with Ron's head leaned on her shoulder, with Harry holding Draco's hand uncertainly in the firelight.

"Hell is empty," Hermione read, "And the devils are here."

Draco reached forward and stole the book from her. "Hey!" she exclaimed in indignation, and Ron and Harry laughed.

"No, Striker, this is the part I wanted Harry to hear. 'Full fathom five thy father lies. Of his bones are coral-'"

"Do you think Neville is still alive?" Ron blurted.

Draco dropped Hermione's book into the fire. He quickly reacted, fishing it out while yipping at the flames at his fingertips, finally tossing it aside with the flames gone out, leaving the edges black with ash. Silence reigned for an agonizingly long time.

"There's no knowing," Hermione finally said, "Whether he's alive or not, given how hard he must have been hit by that falling chandelier."

"Not to mention what the Death Eaters must be doing to him in Hogwarts," Ron cut in. "To try and get information about us and the Order. Or just because one of their lot happens to feel like a spot of torture each day at teatime-"

If they were all thinking this, it was no puzzle to think what Luna at Xaphan must be imagining happening to her boyfriend. But no, Draco tried to cast out of his mind that particularly bitter dimension to his failure.

"Exactly," Hermione said briskly, "We all know that, and unless one of you has any idea how to get back into Hogwarts, that's all we can know, and all we can do. So we have to try not to dwell on what we can't change, and focus on the mission before us-"

"We should go back to Xaphan," Draco blurted, and felt their gazes settle on him so bewildered, it was as if he had just suggested defecting to Voldemort. "No, I'm serious. It's not right, making Luna and the others tell some half-baked story alone."

"You were the one who came up with it," Harry reminded him. "Luna and Neville going picnicking, the Death Eaters happening upon them, the ambush, only Luna escaping..."

"We're abandoning them," Draco said heavily, "After they tried to help us. Just like we're abandoning Neville-"

"If we go back to Xaphan," Ron said, pulling the locket forward from his neck into the firelight for emphasis, "We're pretty much admitting defeat on the mission Dumbledore gave Harry, aren't we?"

"We can't go back to Xaphan," Hermione said with a shudder, "Around all those professors and schoolchildren. We can't take this thing around them." Her gaze was fixed unerringly on the locket, where Draco himself was growing sick of always looking. "We can't go back before we destroy it."

"They're right," Harry said in a conciliatory tone, taking both of Draco's hands and gazing into his eyes in a way that made all the bile and protest in him melt away. "We can't give up yet."

"Okay," Draco said with a sigh, "Okay, so we stay out here, with our pet Horcrux on our necks, uselessly flapping our wings about how to destroy something I'm quite frankly starting to suspect is indestructible. Yes?"

Harry's grip tightened around his hands. "Yes," Harry said. "That sounds about right."

They sat quietly at the fire, Draco leafing drearily through the book's singed pages as if they would somehow hold some key in them, until their respite was broken by a loud clanging sound. Incredibly, Ron had gotten out the Sword of Gryffindor for another round, fruitlessly bringing it down on the locket again and again.

Without any means to destroy a Horcrux, it thus fell logically to do what made no logical sense: try and find another one. They knew there were three Horcruxes still intact, from the locket to Nagini and then a mysterious third which none of them had any earthly idea what could be. Searching for a Horcrux, searching for a way to destroy the one they had, and time

passed by all too quickly for accomplishing absolutely nothing. At least their foray into Hogwarts had given them the illusion of hope.

They were hungry all the time, with their food confined to what Hermione could scrounge up from the environment around them, to the point that Ron also started to make noises about potentially heading to Xaphan at times. Draco had hoped the fare would improve once they began moving around for security's sake, taking the tent through the countryside and pitching it in a new location each night- as much for something to do as for the satisfaction of Hermione's paranoia- but their food supply remained foraging from the woods, and fish caught from lakes and streams if they were lucky.

And if there was one thing the world had not needed to unveil for their mission, it was what the effect of hunger did to Ron. Raised on his mother's cooking, he was hardly complimentary enough of Hermione's. Draco himself had been fed superlatively by house elves all his life no matter how dire the rest of it became, but he took pains not to complain. Except for when he was wearing the Horcrux, and then somehow the complaints escaped his tired mouth regardless. Hermione would tersely tell them to make the food themselves if they hated it so much. And Draco knew it was probably sexist to leave the cooking to the girl amongst them, but she really was the only one with a knack for it.

Over their desultory fare, they spent nights talking over where Voldemort might have hid the third unknown Horcrux, speculation only constrained by Dumbledore's advice to Harry that Voldemort had hidden the Horcruxes in places important to him. Which meant the orphanage he grew up in, Borgin and Burkes where he had worked, and in Harry's eyes, the place that meant the most to him as well as Voldemort: Hogwarts.

"But Dumbledore would have found it, Harry!" was Hermione's usual retort to this suggestion, and Harry's usual argument back was that Dumbledore said he never assumed he knew all of Hogwarts's secrets. Ron's habitual contribution to this argument was his begging the three of them always to use You-Know-Who instead of Voldemort to speak of the devil, worrying about the infamous jinx. Draco thought it was nonsense, but they had to indulge him. Draco personally didn't know if Harry was right or wrong about Hogwarts, but as they had no way to go there regardless, the argument would always pass them by.

Draco wanted to check out Borgin and Burke's, despite Harry believing it a poor prospect, given that the proprietors would have been alert to dark artifacts like Horcruxes. Draco finally got his wish when they were weeks without any new ideas, and took a Polyjuiced trip with Hermione to visit the shop together. His skin crawled the whole time, none the least when he caught sight of the one side of the Vanishing cabinet, and he didn't dare try to hint to the clerk about what they were truly looking for.

They'd had the hypothesis that the locket Draco was wearing would react somehow in the proximity of another Horcrux, like a homing beacon, but since they pieced through all the shop's stock without anything pinging so to speak, they skulked their way out and Apparated back to Ron and Harry none the wiser. If Voldemort had hidden anything in Borgin and Burke's, it was likely buried deep enough in their store that a full raid would be necessary to take it down.

Ron and Harry took a trip to London to check the orphanage where Voldemort was born, and reported back that the orphanage had been replaced by a block of offices many years ago. Hermione suggested digging in the foundations, but Harry was steadfast in his belief that Voldemort would have never hidden a Horcrux in that orphanage, where he had only wanted to escape from.

Their movement through the countryside at least occupied some of their time, Draco and Hermione handling all of the security charms they would take off and put on every time. Draco never forgot a Muffliato again, for one, whatever the setting they were in, let alone when it was just Harry and him in the tent or out in the woods stealing some fugitive time together, which almost always devolved predictably into the most pressing of affairs. At least Harry seemed to still want him as much no matter the bleakness or disappointments, fervor for Draco unjaded, except for when the presence of the Horcrux around one of their necks would bring a gloomy halt to most proceedings.

Draco caught the three of them once discussing him without him, with the word Theo distinct in his ears, but they all downplayed it, and Draco tried to cast it from his mind. They had enough to worry about without a revival of fear for him from the others, even if he was a cold-blooded murderer spending the fast-advancing scarce remainder of his time on this planet wasting theirs.

Somehow weeks slipped away from them like this, with Draco secretly spending his time plotting now increasingly improbable means to successfully sneak back into Hogwarts, through the Honeydukes secret entrance if it was still open, and somehow make it around the place unnoticed long enough to both save Neville and recover the Horcrux Harry suspected so strongly was there. But it was all pipe dreams, with the leaves falling from the trees and the Sword of Gryffindor still falling every now and then on the locket when it was in Ron's possession, still trying what they all knew by then was impossible.

Another perhaps near-impossible thing was what Hermione unfolded to Draco on a cold day in October. She pulled him aside from their tent, which was set in a hooded cove, and towards the open wind, but Draco went with her. He could see just from her expression that she had something confronting on her mind.

"I need your help," she blurted as soon as they were definitely alone, and Draco nodded immediately. "Oh, Frankenstein, it's so embarrassing... and having to wear the locket sometimes doesn't help..."

Draco wondered if it had something to do with Obliviating her parents, and regretting it now. He couldn't blame her if it was. "Whatever it is, Hermione, you know you can tell me. I'll always help you."

Hermione hemmed and hawed for a surprising length of time, for someone who'd come to him so urgently, but finally it came out. "Ron wants us to start having... intercourse!"

Draco tried to stifle a laugh at the word she chose for the act. "I figured that would happen sooner or later, huh? He is around Harry and I all the time, and we do it so much..."

"I know!" Hermione hissed furiously. "Which isn't *helping* things, you know! He came to me all shame-faced in the middle of kissing me and asked if I'd ever thought about, you know, taking the next step, or going further. And when I froze up, he was quick to take his hands off me and say it was my decision, and he never wanted to pressure me, he just wanted to check..."

"So he's respecting your consent, that's good," Draco said thoughtfully, and Hermione looked like she wanted to whack him for his benign observation.

"I don't know what to say to him!" Hermione despaired, and Draco took her by the shoulders firmly. "He said we can wait as long as I need, or never if that's what I... oh, but I don't know *what* I want!"

"Striker," Draco said carefully, "You know, you shouldn't push yourself if you don't feel ready..."

"But I'm worried if I don't," Hermione whispered, "Ron and I will never get the chance, because..."

"You're worried this war will take out one of you before you have the chance," Draco surmised, and felt a pang for both her and Ron when she nodded tightly. "Merlin, Hermione. I can see where you're coming from. But you still shouldn't push yourself, not if you're not sure. The most important thing is that you're comfortable. And I promise you'll both survive, and Ron will be there for you at the end of the war, and long after too." Draco was glad he didn't have to promise he'd be there for that long too.

Hermione stared up at him like she wanted badly to believe him, his vision of what she saw in the Mirror of Erised. "I hope that's true," she said finally, and Draco promised her he would be there if she ever did want any advice when it came to sex, and just by her side forever, because she would always be his best friend. She nodded and led him back to the other two in the fading twilight, as Draco's mind railed at itself behind his forced smile: Who would Hermione go to with things like this once he was gone?

As unsure as Hermione was about her relationship with Ron now, her intellect was sharp as ever where it counted. One blustery evening weeks after, Hermione sat up in the middle of a sniping match about food, and blurted out, "What if the Sword of Gryffindor is a fake?" When they all stared at her blankly, she fretted, "Oh, all this time I've been wondering if I was wrong about the goblin-forged steel imbibing the Basilisk venom, or if it had worn off, or if we were wrong thinking that could demolish a Horcrux at all. But what if that's not the problem? What if this is just an ordinary sword, and the one Harry used to slay the Basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets is somewhere else?"

"Because Dumbledore tried to leave Draco the sword," Harry said slowly, "But he must have known that some of what he left us would be confiscated, and it would all be searched over."

"That's why he set that enchantment on *Secrets of the Darkest Art* for me, to look like an ordinary set of fairy tales," Hermione said excitedly. "He knew what would happen with the Ministry executing the will. Of course he knew."

Draco pushed aside the horrifying mortification at the thought of everything they'd done to infiltrate Hogwarts being to purloin a *fake*. "Then where's the real Sword of Gryffindor?" Draco asked, and Hermione deflated, her flash of inspiration clearly not having led her that far.

"Maybe it's like the Horcruxes," Ron said thoughtfully. "The sword was a gift for Draco. So maybe it's been left in a place that's important to him for him to find. But we've already searched Grimmauld... it couldn't be Xaphan, with so many people going there..."

"There's Malfoy Manor," Harry blurted, and seemed to regret it immediately at the look Draco gave him.

"If you lot want to make a daring venture into Malfoy Manor," Draco said caustically, "By all means, have the time of your lives. I'll just stay here and look after the tent. Prevent any excess mud or leaf fall from getting on it."

"We don't know for sure it's fake, though," Harry said, speaking fast as they all were, now that they had something like a lead to chase at last. "How can we know for sure?"

The answer to this for once fell into their lap, and soon. Harry and Draco were off by themselves near the river, stealing a heated kiss, when the sound of voices sent Draco pulling back from Harry and nearly stumbling against the back of the tree where they stood. "Ssh!" Draco hissed at the sound of Harry's panting breath, and withdrew to hide behind the tree, peering out for signs of life. His heart had gone to his throat, but the noises weren't those of a prepared ambush, but full-voiced conversation, unwary of whoever might be listening. They seemed to trust they were alone in the immediate radius, with Harry and Draco's cautious footsteps closer soft enough not to alert them.

They didn't seem to be speaking any language Draco knew, low and guttural with harsh sounds a bit like German, but it was something else entirely. They were debating back in forth in their language, one gesturing towards the river. Draco had the brief impression the forms were diminutive, but he kept the talon wand raised high regardless, ready for the worst, even up to Aunt Bella somehow being behind the guileless voices, leading them to their destruction. He and Harry exchanged a glance, and then with a nod of agreement, they sprang out from behind the nearest shrub and cast a twin Expelliarmus at the strangers.

Except neither of the strangers had wands to take from them, so the red light impacting their small frames just sent them stumbling back in confusion. The two men were goblins. That didn't keep Draco from rushing forward and leveling his wand point blank at the one called Gornuk. Harry quickly matched him with the other.

"Harry Potter?" said one of the goblins wonderingly, and they backed up, but they had nowhere to go with the river behind them.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked boldly, not hiding his identity and telltale scar. "Are you spying for You-Know-Who?"

"Goblins do not take sides in wizard's wars," scoffed the one with Harry's wand in his face, "Only in our own. You-Know-Who is nothing to us. Neither is Harry Potter."

"What are you doing out in the wilderness, though?" Draco prodded, keeping alert though neither of the goblins seemed liable to start putting up a fight.

The goblins exchanged swift glances. "My name is Griphook," said the goblin Harry had menaced, "And this is Gornuk. We are in hiding."

It all came out quickly then, the goblins' grievances against wizards recently that had led them to depart their positions at Gringotts and take to the countryside to lay low until the wizarding troubles resolved themselves. Slowly, Harry and Draco's wands lowered, and Ron and Hermione were called out from the tent to join them around the goblin's nearby fire, where they were roasting salmon they'd caught from the river.

"I deemed it prudent to go on the run," said Gornuk. "Having refused what I considered an impertinent request, I could see that my personal safety was in jeopardy."

"An impertinent request?" Ron echoed, though his attention seemed half-divided between the goblins and their salmon cooking.

"Duties ill-befitting the dignity of my race," Gornuk said bluntly, clearly unhappy with the mere recollection. "I am not a house-elf."

"Griphook?" Hermione asked, with that instinctive sympathy she had extending naturally to the goblins. "Were you mistreated as well?"

"Similar reasons. Gringotts is no longer under the sole control of my race. I recognize no wizarding master."

"And you've ended up in the woods," Hermione said with a sigh. "Are you familiar with the Citadelle Xaphan?"

"We have heard of the new school, yes," Gornuk said, without anything good for that school in his tone.

"We could show you the way there, if you want," Harry offered, the consummate do-gooder as ever. "Xaphan is the one place in the country secure from Death Eaters. You'd be safer there-"

"Have you been listening, boy?" Griphook interrupted impatiently, with no regard for Harry Potter to be seen. "We seek to avoid wizarding wars. And that means the avoidance of one side or another. We did not leave Gringotts to exchange one set of overlords for another. We offer now hospitality to a fellow traveler, but our interchange will go no further."

"You worked at Gringotts," Hermione said thoughtfully. "You must have some familiarity with antique objects."

Gornuk took the salmon off the fire, and at Ron's blatant salivating, offered to share their bounty with him. Draco shot Ron a warning look, but Ron happily ignored it and began to

stuff his face. Harry and then Hermione joined him in accepting the goblins' hospitality, though there was a gleam in Hermione's eye as she ate that Draco knew well. Then Draco caught on to Hermione's drift and pulled himself up so hard he almost got whiplash.

"Griphook," Draco said, "Could you recognize goblin-forged steel if you saw it? The kind of goblin-made weapon that lasts for centuries?"

Griphook drew his slight body up indignantly. "Certainly I could. My duties at Gringotts required no less. Any goblins with sense recognize their own work."

Harry seemed to catch on, and leapt to his feet, running back from the riverside towards their hidden tent. "There's something we'd like for you to look at for us, then," Draco said with scarcely concealed excitement. "Another favor for a fellow traveler."

Ron still looked clueless, too rapt in his unexpected second dinner to follow along. "I'd say this salmon is already favor enough, you're one hell of a chef, mate," he said contentedly to Gornuk, before Draco elbowed him in the side.

Harry came running back with metal glinting from his hip, making Draco's heart seize up with nervous expectation. The sight of Harry with the Sword of Gryffindor was both gratifying and disappointing now, as Harry knelt down again by the fire and took the Sword of Gryffindor out of its scabbard to show the goblins. Griphook withdrew a magnifying glass from his pocket and leaned forward, seeming caught up in the task despite himself.

"This is meant to be goblin-forged," Harry told them, and it took only a minute of Griphook scrutinizing the sword for him to let out a harsh snort.

"This sword is as goblin-forged as I am a follower of the Dark Lord," Griphook said contemptuously. "See, here?" He began to show them imperfections only visible to his gaze. "Goblin-forged weapons like this have properties that only goblin-made armor possesses," he began, before launching into an extensive lecture on all the ways this poor blade was lacking. Draco could hardly follow with his excitement at a fever pitch, Ron joining in at last by his side with ruddy cheeks and heavy breathing.

"Cor," Ron said, cutting off an aggrieved Griphook. "So if- if we knew a sword was meant to be goblin-made, then happened upon this one, then..."

"Then," Griphook said over his spectacles, regarding the four humans sternly with judgment for their own gullibleness, "I regret to tell you that you have been taken in by a fake, young wizard. A more credible fake than most, to be sure, but there is no doubt. This is a fake nonetheless."

Once they parted from Griphook and Gornuk, they made the effort to relocate themselves and their tent to another location down the river, far from the goblins' campsite, just in case. Once they were settled in, they stayed up far later than they should have, discussing their new revelation and what it meant. "It means there's the real Sword of Gryffindor out there

somewhere, that Dumbledore wanted you to have," Ron kept saying to Draco, tugging on the chain of the locket around his neck, "And maybe that will destroy this blasted thing for us."

Ron and Hermione tired themselves out speculating, and went to sleep, but Harry and Draco left the tent to speak more at length, too wired to rest on this new information. "But where could the real Sword of Gryffindor be?" Harry kept saying, until at last he answered his own question. "I don't know, Draco- but maybe- just maybe- do you think- at Godric's Hollow?"

Godric's Hollow

They arrived to a fall of brown leaves around them, the sky obscured by the nearly bare trees above them. Winter had well and truly come to Godric's Hollow. At least there was not snow yet, in what Draco thought vaguely to be mid-December. Cottages stretched down a narrow road, with streetlights showing off the center of the small quaint village before them. *A History of Magic* had gone on about the illustrious witches and wizards who'd lived in this place, including Godric Gryffindor. At the moment, it felt like none of them could have been as momentous as Harry Potter, if he was about to hold the Sword of Gryffindor in his hand.

Harry stood frozen at Draco's side before Hermione called them along, going down the row of cottages while Harry stared at each. Harry held Draco's hand as he walked. "I don't know any of these. I don't have any memory of them. Any of them could be my parents' house, and I wouldn't know."

The breeze felt full of ice crystals, sweeping in from somewhere farther north. It whipped as the four of them, securely Polyjuiced into nondescript Muggle adults, made their way down the small lane. It veered to the left into a town center full of Christmas lights, with a tree at the very center blocking what looked to be a war memorial. There was shops, a little church, a pub, and every adornment you could wish for in a conventional British town. Harry must be thinking how strange it was, eerie in its own way, for life to go on so smoothly in a place where something so dark and ineffable had happened.

As they passed the war memorial, it changed from a non-descript obelisk to three figures, a Nativity scene: James, Lily, and Harry Potter. A bespectacled James and lovely Lily both looked kindly, the baby Harry as innocent as any baby Jesus, and as unscarred. The magic that had unveiled it to their wizarding visitors held up as they all approached it more closely. "Bloody hell," Ron breathed, while Hermione looked around nervously for anyone noticing the four visitors paying close attention to this fraught subject. "Harry, it's you. What do you make of it?"

"I think," Harry said shakily, "That I want to see my parents' graves." He gestured towards the little church, which had a graveyard beyond it, and the four of them fell in line together, recognizing this as the pilgrimage it was for Harry. They weren't just there for the Sword of Gryffindor, which in fact they had no idea how to possibly locate here. They would be there for Harry as he faced down for the first time the place where his life had nearly ended, and everything had changed. Where the last reminders of his birth family outside the Mirror of Erised remained.

Draco made very sure to keep a close hold of Harry's hand, despite the strange sight it might make to passing Muggles to see two men holding hands. Harry needed him for sure, and that bound them together in a way that couldn't be easily removed. He reached and felt at the golden rose ring on Harry's finger, a security to them both, that it sat in place as a testament to how very much Harry would never be alone again (for now, for now.)

The churchyard was opened with a kissing gate, which let people come through but kept animals out. Draco trailed his free gloved fingers across the icy iron bars as they passed them, trying to shake the feeling of some calamity liable to be unleashed upon them at any moment. The calamity here had already come and passed, for so many, and then for two who mattered the most tonight.

The first grave they found was an Abbott, as if the graves like Hogwarts students were Sorted alphabetically. Draco wondered instinctively if this could be the Abbott who had died so recently at the hands of Death Eaters, but they swept past it with little time to delay. Their eyes were only for James and Lily Potter. They could hardly afford to linger overlong in one of the first places in the country that the enemy would expect to find Harry Potter. So their footsteps swept on skidding over clumps of dead leaves.

Draco's mind left Harry for the first time when Hermione happened upon a notable set of graves. *Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.* Such were the words that adorned the run-down grave of Dumbledore's mother, and his little sister Ariana. It was hard not to self-centeredly read the words as some hint from Dumbledore about where Draco's treasure the sword could be found. Invert it, and it read, *Where your heart is, there your treasure will be also.* Well, Draco didn't know if he could expect to find the Sword of Gryffindor embedded magically inside Harry's heart.

"Grindelwald killed her," Ron said softly, speaking the official cover story Draco had given out for the benefit of everyone else, though Draco knew the real truth. The man who had likely written those words had been the one to put his sister in the ground, but the world thought it otherwise now thanks to Draco, and Grindelwald's last wish. It made Draco wonder if Aberforth had ever seen fit to take a trip here back down his own memory lane, to visit his sister's grave with the clear truth now that Aberforth himself at least hadn't killed her.

"You don't think Dumbledore could have hidden anything there," Hermione said anxiously, as if grave-robbing was now suddenly on the agenda. Draco gave her a wan smile and moved on. If they were expecting the Sword of Gryffindor to spring out of one of the graves for them magically waiting, he had no doubt they would be disappointed.

Grave-robbing, though, suddenly went to the top of Draco's thought process after all, when they happened upon one of the oldest graves in the yard, and it held the symbol of the Deathly Hallows. Draco let go of Harry to virtually sprint over when Ron called out his finding, dodging around headstones like an athlete until he could stand face to face with the Hallows' circle, line, and triangle below a faded name. Draco couldn't read the name, so he lit his wand and knelt close to read it.

"You don't think this is where Dumbledore could have left something for you," Harry said wonderingly, in the midst of the macabre, while Draco resisted the impulse to begin casting Diffindo upon the cold hard ground below the grave like a madman.

"Ignotus," Draco read, and frowned at the unfamiliar name. It did sound ancient and mysterious, at least. "Pe- Pe..."

"Draco, let's find Harry's parents before we linger over anything else," Hermione whispered, even as Draco tried to squint and make out the end of the last name.

"Peverell," Draco said finally. "Does that ring a bell with anyone?"

"Maybe," said Harry. "I don't know. Draco, why do you think the mark of the Deathly Hallows is here, in this graveyard?" It sent a shiver down Draco's spine to hear it spoken aloud, and yet Hermione corralled them all into walking again. *Okay, if the Sword of Gryffindor doesn't get found, I'm coming back to this grave, upturning all this old dust, and making myself one bit closer to a certified dark lord.*

When they finally found the Potters' grave, Draco made sure he had tight hold of his Harry's hand again. They walked over towards where Ron had indicated, with Harry's hand growing tense and clammy in Draco's. It was white marble, standing out in the midst of mildewed fading stones, and Hermione made a sound of awe at the unexpected beauty of this piece of history. But they were in a place to marvel at its construction. Harry's only attention seemed for the words upon it, the words that marked his parents' fate:

James Potter, born 27 March 1960, died 31 October 1981

Lily Potter, born 30 January 1960, died 31 October 1981

The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.

"'The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death'," Ron read aloud, and really, the smattering of epigraphs he'd been reading across this graveyard was giving Draco a renewed appreciation for the pithy one he'd applied to Grindelwald's grave. "What does that mean?"

"That it's not the end for them, I suppose," Hermione said with an awkward cough, peering over at a silent Harry as if worried any word she spoke could break him in this moment. "That in the end, there may be some future where we'll all be together again... I don't know."

"It sounds like the inscription on the Mirror of Espilce," Draco noted softly. "'Even death may die in the dawning of the eclipse.'"

"Mysterious," Ron said uncomfortably, and they stood there at Harry's side letting him look his fill at his parents' graves.

With Draco's gaze locked on Harry's face, it didn't take long for Draco to see Harry dissolve into tears, which Harry didn't try to hide. Draco pulled Harry's face against his shoulder, and Harry collapsed there, letting his tears fall against Draco's cloak. The sight of Harry breaking down was no less affecting with Harry Polyjuiced into a stranger. Draco felt his heart go out to Harry, but no words seemed sufficient for what Harry was undergoing. Especially coming from a person like Draco, who couldn't be sure that if he happened upon his own parents' graves, part of him wouldn't be relieved.

Ron and Hermione kept a respectful distance, letting Draco rub Harry's back. Harry soon blinked the worst of it away, though, separating from Draco with an angry wipe at his face with his sleeve. He was breathing hard, breath showing up in puffs of white in the cold air, and the closest he said to speaking out his undeniable pain was, "I know it's a risk. But I wish we'd brought flowers."

Wordlessly, the most risk-averse of them, Hermione, conjured Christmas roses for the grave. Draco was the one to lean forward and place the wreath on top of the white marble, which made a gracefully picturesque sight, lovely as Lily Potter must have been, the pale stone and the pristine white of the petals.

"We can go, now," Harry said quietly, and Draco helped lead him down the path towards the kissing gate. Harry waited for Ron and Hermione to go out first, and Draco pressed a hard kiss to the side of Harry's face before Draco let him follow.

"We should try to find their old house," Hermione suggested in a whisper as they crossed through the town center again the other way. "I think if Dumbledore was going to hide the sword anywhere, it would be there. Maybe some way only we could see."

They went over the row of Christmas-lit cottages along another dark narrow street, and this time they hit the jackpot. There was no missing the one cottage different from the rest, which resembled in its misshapen husk some dark felled beast. The hedge was overgrown like a fairytale briar, with one's step made difficult by the coating of weeds and rubble along the ground.

This was not rubble from the wear of ages, though, like the winding obsidian of Xaphan, but from an explosion: the right side of the house was blown out, from what must have been the battle there, and Voldemort's self-fatal Killing curse. Still, enough time had passed since that day for ivy to grow over the hunched shape of the house, giving the place the air overall of an ancient ruin regardless of the limited span of time, with the matching air of mystery and threat attached.

Where your heart is, there your treasure will be also, Draco thought with hushed reverence, and slowly, they all advanced on what remained of the Potters' house. Ron's hand brushed the rusty gate of the house, and the function of this startling exhibition of decay became apparent: it was a monument. A sign came up from the ground, wood with golden letters embossed upon it like something Draco would have made.

On this spot, on the night of 31 October 1981, Lily and James Potter lost their lives.

Their son, Harry, remains the only wizard ever to have survived the Killing Curse.

This house, invisible to Muggles, has been left in its ruined state as a monument to the Potters

and as a reminder of the violence that tore apart their family.

Around the solemn words, graffiti from many visitors proliferated, to the point that it was obvious that this was not just a pilgrimage for Harry. For so many, it seemed, this was a sacred place, holy ground, a shrine even, to the miracle that had taken place here, and to the lost.

They advanced past the sign to enter the ruin itself, while Harry seemed to take pains to keep his face perfectly level and unmoved this time. "I don't remember this place either," he whispered in Draco's ear, "Just the flashes I had from Dementors of the moment they died."

There was nothing Draco could think of to say to that. He just remained at Harry's side as they all lit their wands and began to survey the rubble. "Do you really think the Sword of Gryffindor is just going to be lying there underneath a pile of stones?" Ron groused, and Hermione shot him a severe look.

"The expression is to leave no stone unturned," Draco quipped, nudging at Ron, and Ron sighed and helped them in their minute inspection.

Eventually, once they had done the outside, they advanced inside, careful to keep their footing in the pebbles and dust and knotted weeds. Ron and Hermione agreed to take the first floor, while Draco and Harry ascended to the second. Every step on the rickety old staircase was perilous, so Draco insisted upon going first, ready with magic to stop either of their falls. Harry didn't seem a hundred percent fully there with them, too caught by the wonder and terror of where they had found themselves.

They went safely through to the top floor of the cottage, and Draco breathed a sigh of relief, with Harry sighing in something else entirely as they walked down the hallway and came to what was soon apparent to be James and Lily's room. Left truly untouched, there were photographs, along with a closet full of clothes for each of them that Harry spent quite a bit of time looking through, despite the unlikelihood they would find anything there. It was like their bodies were there, lingering remnants in the clothes they had worn day to day when still alive, as much as they had been in their graves.

"Come on, Harry," Draco said, catching his hand after going through all the drawers. "I don't think there's anything here."

"Okay," Harry said, and let himself be led, staring at the bed on the way out like he wanted to lay down on it.

Cursory searches of bathrooms and closets revealed nothing. Draco's heart pounded faster as they approached the section of the house most liable to collapse, and not because of that lack of structural integrity. Some part of him said that if the Sword of Gryffindor was anywhere it would be there, in the baby's room, where Lily Potter had died defending her son from Voldemort.

They were left staring out at the gaping maw the room ended in, feet placed firmly in the precarious remnant of the room, with Harry's attention caught at once by a cradle just beside the edge. Draco began to inspect the cabinets again, while keeping one watchful eye on Harry. Harry brought the light from his wand down into the cradle, and at least there were no awful lingering traces of blood there, give Voldemort that. But this was still the exact place the Dementors had made Harry watch James and Lily die.

"Harry, be careful by the edge, we don't want you falling out of the house," Draco said, with a bit of levity in his voice he regretted right after. Harry just nodded intently, then seemed to master himself and join Draco in surveying the floorboards for any that might be loose with something underneath. It wasn't until their faces got close enough in the wand and moonlight glow that Draco could see Harry was crying again.

"Harry, why don't you go back downstairs, I can handle this," Draco said immediately, and Harry recoiled from him, looking ashamed as he wiped at his pouring eyes. Draco gave him a hard kiss on the forehead. "It's nothing to worry about, Harry, I can do this bit on my own. Why don't you just go to the front of the house and take a rest."

Harry obeyed numbly, letting Draco squeeze his hand before he let him go. Harry's tears were making Draco regret an expedition he was already beginning to suspect would yield no dividends like all the rest. Why *would* Dumbledore hide the sword here where any tourist could gallivant in and take it? As it was, this was only a macabre exercise in torturing Harry with the past, while fruitlessly pursuing the sword like it might as well have been some fugitive shooting star.

Draco pored over the rooms upstairs at length regardless, leaving no stone unturned as he'd promised, and returned to James and Lily's room for a second inspection without Harry as a distraction. The light of the talon wand had imprinted in front of his vision by now, swimming there in negative like a signpost of failure. He tried to blink it aside and went through the drawers in the room much more slowly this time, checking for secret cubbies and trapdoors even as he felt increasingly like a fool...

"HARRY!" screamed Hermione, and Draco froze, listening from above for what Harry possibly could have done to irritate her so badly. And then he heard Ron cry out wordlessly too, and realized that it might be danger to Harry that had drawn out her exclamation, so loud it seemed liable to have shaken loose some of the house's ghosts.

Draco sped down the hall and the stairs- too fast, as his speed caught up with him on one of the middle stairs near the bend and his foot went through the weakened wood in the air. He felt something turn in his ankle, pain sharp enough to make him scream too, even as his head whipped around to try and see what threatened his friends. He couldn't make it out from there, so he had to spend precious seconds trying to wrench his aching ankle out of the sharp edges of the hardwood, while trying not to fall off the narrow staircase in the process. The seconds seemed to stretch on to minutes, as he heard both Ron and Hermione cry out again, and a massive crash that shook the house to its foundations...

Draco got his foot loose and raced down the rest of the stairs, the risk of falling be damned, even as his ankle ignited with pain and threatened to turn underneath him. What he saw made him glad he had hurried, even as his rational senses struggled to stretch to grasp a sight as horrifying as the one before him: Ron and Hermione collapsed bleeding in a pile of rubble from the nearest wall, both seemingly unconscious, their wands dropped from their hands beside them amidst the fallen stone. And there was Harry, except it was not just Harry but a snake, a snake atop him holding him down, with his wand fallen just out of his reach beside him, the powerful coils covering him and keeping him from reaching out to take it and defend himself.

Draco knew this snake, if only from the smell. He'd feared it for far longer than it had been when this snake was the one to kill his godfather. It was the last Horcrux that had Harry in its foul clutches, that reared up and hissed at Draco with every fiber of animosity in its slithering frame. "Nagini," Draco said aloud, frozen for the moment it took to speak the word as fear consumed his insides, then he had to spring aside as fast as he could as Nagini struck.

Draco had the nauseating impression of the strong, muscular body of Nagini leaping at him, instantly recognizing him as a foe, then brushing against him, sending him flying to the ground with fangs just missing his arm. He still dropped the talon wand in his jerking attempt to escape the bite, and watched it bounce away with bile in his throat. He remembered the undead Basilisk springing at him, knocking him away, but Nagini did not let its prey go so easily. He was instantly pinned beneath the coiled scales the way Harry had been, with only his arms and face left to dodge away from Nagini's fangs.

Draco expected the bite to never come, because he was sure Harry once released from Nagini would have taken hold of his wand and shot some spell at the snake to save Draco, to save his lover like he always did. But nothing was forthcoming, and Nagini's fangs dragged across Draco's arm through the jacket and cashmere sleeve like there was nothing in the way, sending an excruciating pain through his whole frame. Draco screamed, loud enough to make his own head hurt, and Nagini leered down at its struggling prey, coils coming up to encircle Draco's body as if to choke it like a boa constrictor within its grasp...

The talon wand came flying back to Draco's hand, uncalled, unexpected, but Draco wasn't complaining. He cast Flipendo frantically, just to get Nagini off him, but the force of the spell wasn't enough to unhinge the strength of those coils. It took a double shot of Lacarnum inflamari to loosen them, the sinews writhing in pain as the hot fire seared at them, and let Draco roll away blindly. He staggered to his feet leaving his back to Nagini, a mistake he knew, but he had to get to Harry. "Here!" Draco cried out, offering Harry his hand, but Harry shook his head pained, eyes wide in complete panic.

"It's the Horcrux, it's holding me down!" Harry shouted, and Draco sprang forward and tried to wrench the locket from Harry's neck, but found it embedded in his chest under his shirt, searing there up to the skin. Draco just managed to draw them both back enough to escape a lashing of Nagini's tail towards them, before the beast rounded on them squarely, fangs flashing in the moonlight...

Draco summoned Harry's wand to come back to him like the talon wand had on its own to him, anything so Harry could defend himself. As it was, Draco had to defend Harry, sending fireballs into the face of Nagini to try to keep it back. Nagini hissed in pain but barreled through the flames, dauntless in its pursuit of Harry, until Harry lifted his wand and cast Confringo at the snake, sending them all flying backwards and slamming into the nearest walls. The locket was jarred from Harry's chest, and Harry climbed shakily to his feet. Draco snatched the locket from Harry's neck and pushed it into his own pocket, thinking that if one of them had to be caught, it should be him.

Nagini picked itself up slowly to come at them again, and Draco had in mind what to do this time, even as the Horcrux beat in his ears, twice his own heartbeat, making him feel his heart was about to give out on him or that he was simply going mad. "It's summoned the Death Eaters!" Harry was screaming at him. "We have to go, Draco, now-"

"Wake up Ron and Hermione, I know a spell for Nagini," Draco gasped, falling to his knees from the pain in his ankle he had abruptly started feeling again and the excruciating agony spreading through him from the bite in his arm. "I know one!" he shouted at Harry, and Harry

raced along the side of the wall towards Ron and Hermione's felled bodies. When Nagini was close enough that Draco could catch its foul smell, Draco howled out, "Dracosanguis!"

They couldn't take out Nagini, not truly. Until they had the Sword of Gryffindor, Nagini was a Horcrux and unkillable, but there was a way Draco had found to slow down or cut down any snake. "Dracosanguis!" he gasped like he had in the Chamber of Secrets, setting Nagini's blood aflame and making the snake fly back from where he had been pouncing, rolling backwards on the floor in agony. "Dracosanguis, Dracosanguis, Dracosanguis..."

"Enervate! Enervate!" Draco heard from across the hall, and saw Harry helping up a dazed Ron and Hermione, who by the marks on them seemed to have been caught by a lash of Nagini's tail and sent into a wall that collapsed under the weight like the stair had for Draco, the ruins as perilous as the snake before them. Hermione shrieked at the sight of the snake so near Draco, picking itself up somehow despite the agony Draco was torturing it with, and screamed, "Flipendo!"

Hers was strong enough to uproot Nagini from the ground and send him flying away flipping in the air, tail a whip that caught at the furniture as it passed and sent debris flying at Draco. Draco crouched down and covered his face only for Ron to dart across the room and grab him, pulling him by the hand towards their side of the hall. As soon as they had Draco with them, Hermione shot a wordless explosive curse up towards the ceiling, and it crashed down before them and set a wall of rock between them and Nagini.

A section of wall at the front of the house capsized with it, blocking them into the house from the other side, and Draco heard the distinctive loud pops of Apparition. Dark cloaks and hoods appeared before them on the sleepy Muggle street under the crescent moon, a horde of Death Eaters descending to finish the job Nagini had started and take down the Chosen One for good.

"Let's go!" Harry yelled, and there were cries of bloodthirsty outrage as the four of them Apparated out of the house, away from the Death Eaters, although they could not be certain the Death Eaters were not right on their Apparition trail... that Nagini would not be with them, eager to bite more, and draw more blood...

"Grab your bags!" Hermione ordered, "We have to keep going," and Draco seized the Sword of Gryffindor from where it stuck out from the end of Ron's bag and put the thing to the first good use they had ever made of it.

"Portus!" Draco gasped, knowing a Portkey was harder to follow if the Death Eaters couldn't get their hands directly on it, and anyway, it was too far to Apparate them all where he meant to go. "Get your things and grab onto it! We're going now!"

Harry reeled forward, looking about dead on his feet, but followed what Draco told him, as did the other two, and the Portkey wheeled them away, sweeping them off their feet and away from the cries of arriving Death Eaters, who, yes, had followed them...

Draco collapsed in the snow face-first, letting the sword fly from his hand. Ron kept hold of it, and Draco's heart nearly burst out of his chest at the thought of the Horcrux in his pocket slipping away, but no, it was bouncing out of his pocket at the blow of falling so hard on the

cold wet ground, tumbling out along with the Mirror of Espilce like two dark souvenirs of all of his fatal journeys. Draco seized them both, putting the Mirror of Espilce in his pocket, and trying to put the locket around his neck, but Hermione stopped him, taking it for herself.

"You can't, Draco, you're injured!" she exclaimed, while Ron looked wildly around for Death Eaters, who it seemed finally had lost their trail. Draco squinted at her for a moment, before pain overwhelmed the sheer terror that had possessed him so strongly for the past half hour.

"Oh, right, my ankle," Draco said, feeling at it blindly, only to crank his neck and see there was blood on it. "It's worse than I thought, you'll have to fix it, Striker..."

"No, you great blunderbus, your arm!" Hermione shrieked, looking half a second from whacking him if he hadn't been prone on the ground wounded. "You've been bitten by that awful thing! You're bleeding from your arm on your ankle!"

"Where are we?" Harry said, gingerly picking himself up from the snow that coated the ground, and Draco just had the presence of mind to tell them,

"L'Infern," before he passed out.

Draco awoke to familiar fingers stroking his hair. "What," he breathed, opening his eyes only to turn and see Harry in Gryffindor red pajamas beside him. Except they were not in the tent, but in some mysterious stone chamber, in a luxurious green bed with piles of pillows and a dresser and mirror. The mirror reflected the light of the lantern on the floor and illuminated Harry's handsome face, staring down at Draco with infinite, aching care.

"What happened?" Draco whispered, and Harry smiled at him, though not perhaps as broadly as he might have.

"You were hurt," Harry said with a sigh. "From the snake. You passed out after you took us to Castell de L'Infern. Ron was upset, it's very cold here... anyway, Hermione fixed your ankle with magic, so it's not sprained anymore. And she put dittany in the fang marks on your arm. They should heal fine, and yes, not leave scars," said Harry at the grimace Draco made, smiling wider then. "We knew you'd ask that."

"So I'm gonna be fine," Draco said cautiously. It seemed impossibly fortunate, after the ordeal they had just been through with Nagini, and Death Eaters appearing just in their wake.

"I'm the one who might have a scar," Harry said sheepishly, glancing down at his chest. The red pajamas were unbuttoned enough to show some of the skin there, and Draco made out a red blemish. He quickly pulled the shirt open to see what Harry was talking about, and found the imprint of the locket seared onto Harry's skin, just as he might have feared. "The Horcrux wouldn't let go of me for so long, I think it burnt into the skin, so when it got free..." He seemed genuinely apologetic about this, as if worried Draco would no longer like him now that he was besmirched this way.

"Will it scar?" Draco asked, and trailed his fingers along the oval mark, though he switched arms quickly at the protest of his bitten one. "Poor Harry... I might have to break up with you now, I can't handle an imperfect Chosen One..."

"Draco," Harry whined, "Don't joke like that, please," and Draco made an apologetic face.

"What is this room?" Draco finally got around to asking, done being predictably distracted by Harry's body, and Harry glanced around them like he didn't know too well himself. Whatever it was, it was a well-insulated room. There was not a hint of the chill Ron had apparently complained of outside.

"Hermione thinks it must be where Karkaroff lived, when he was being held at Xaphan," Harry said carefully, seeming to walk on eggshells when it came to mentioning someone Draco had murdered. Draco didn't show a reaction at the name, and in truth, that was one piece of work he was the least guilty about, given Karkaroff's intentions towards his godfather. If anything, an unfortunate, illicit flash of pride went through him.

"Did he scrounge up all this furniture from the ruins?" Draco asked, drawing a languid hand over the jade bed. "It's far nicer than I would have imagined. Or did Gilderoy get all this together for him? He always was one for luxury."

"We don't know," Harry said. "We just found the place and thought it would be the most comfortable for a convalescent. Ron and Hermione have their own room, in the tent inside one of these magically insulated rooms."

"And you must have insisted on staying with the convalescent," Draco said teasingly, "Despite medical advice," and Harry nodded shame-facedly.

"I just didn't want to leave your side when you were hurt," Harry said simply, and earned a long, pressing kiss from the supposedly languishing convalescent.

"I think you needed to be with me too," Draco dared to say, "After what you went through visiting those places," and miserably, Harry nodded. It earned him a far longer kiss for that.

"Oh, you're awake!" A girl's voice exclaimed, as the door to the room was thrown open. "And you're kissing! I'm not surprised at all! Hello, Harry Potter! Hello, cousin!"

"That's the part I forgot to tell you," Harry said sheepishly, drawing back, and Draco sat back up to see the beaming face of his cousin waiting for him. She had on heavy dark robes and a hooded cloak, let down so he could see her billowing brilliant light hair in the sunlight. "Luna's here too."

"Draco!" Luna cried, waving her arms in sheer elation, so Draco picked himself up enough to stumble to his feet and give her the hug she clearly needed from him. "Oh, Draco, I've missed you so much! To think of you, here at L'Infern also!" Draco found he had needed the hug as well. It was indescribably good to see Luna, alive and intact as always seemed tenuous during this war no matter where she had to hide.

"Also?" Draco said suspiciously, and Luna just grinned at him in unadulterated joy.

"I've been doing a study program of Xaphan, for the castle rebuilding project. Gilderoy comes with me sometimes. Not today," she added, and Draco thanked his lucky stars for that. "Professor McGonagall makes us Portkeys here, and they work on the return trip as well. I've got hours until then."

"Interesting educational program at Xaphan," Hermione commented, and Draco wasn't sure if she was critical for the idea of the L'Infern excursion for a sole Luna, or the fact that it had thrown the inconvenient Luna right upon their doorstop.

"Oh, I heard you were hurt, though," Luna said more sorrowfully. "How are you feeling, cousin? Do you need any help to walk?"

"No," Draco said, keeping hold of her arm against the pain that had exploded in his bitten arm. "No, I'm fine, Luna, I promise."

"What have you all been getting up to?" Luna asked bluntly. "Who is it who could hurt *you*, Draco?"

Hermione and Ron stood behind Luna, looking to have tried and failed to impede her mission to go greet her beloved cousin. "I can't tell you, Luna, I'm sorry," was his immediate response, and Luna slipped back and pouted at him mightily. Draco felt an almost paralyzing wave of fondness, almost stronger than his guilt.

"Can I have some time alone with my cousin?" Draco asked the others, and Luna lit up, while Harry in particular looked sour about the proposal, even as he agreed. "Just give me time to get dressed for this weather," he added, before he had to head out in the snow.

Luna went for a walk with him through the main courtyard of Xaphan, ending up at the enchanted garden, magically untouched with snow. She had put up her cloak against the wind chill of the mountains, but she lowered it once they were standing within the virtual oasis of the garden, blooming with fruit trees and legumes and Seguinus Sade's famous hazelnuts.

It bloomed all year, Draco knew thanks to Gilderoy, who'd been in charge of the project during his years at L'Infern. He had done an unusually good job, to look at it now. It didn't seem Ron would be complaining so fervently over dinner tonight- that was, unless perhaps if Luna was there to share it with them. But sending her away as coldly as ever seemed impossible to him now, after the time that had passed and everything he knew he'd put Luna through, with Neville still missing...

"Couldn't you just tell me what's going on?" Luna said hopefully, blunt as ever. "It seems like fate that we met here. And I always should have been on your mission with you, you know that."

Draco closed his eyes, and maybe it was the pain in his arm, but some resolution set in him then. "You know what? Fine. Come closer, cousin. I'm going to tell you everything. For starters, there's something called a Horcrux..."

The Unexpected Christmas

"You told her?" were the first words from an outraged Ron. "How could you tell her?"

"Draco, I can't believe you!" called an incensed Hermione, starting up from where she and Harry had been magically chopping fruit for their breakfast. "Don't you think that's a decision we should have all discussed together first?"

"No offense, Luna, but she's right," said Harry, dropping a half-chopped apple to stalk over and look Draco in the eye. "Draco, why would you do this without us?" *Sorry, Harry, I let you down one more time. Compared to some others, though, this is pretty negligible, don't you think*?

They were all irked at him, but that was the operative word: irked, not terrified, as one might imagine them to be for the disclosure of their secret to any living being. Draco could tell instantly that their objections would be short-lived, and they would all come around to Luna.

"Draco said it's because I deserve to know," Luna said brightly, similarly undaunted by this show of opposition. She had indeed taken the news of their formidable opposition with all the chipperness known to man.

Hermione paled considerably where she sat. A handful of berries slid out from between her fingers unnoticed. "You mean because of what happened to Neville?" she asked, her guilt clearly activated, and Ron and Harry didn't seem to dare dispute that, at least to Luna's face.

"And I've worn the Horcrux before, during your mission to Hogwarts," Luna said, the fatal word coming out odd in her sweet young voice. "When I was keeping it safe. And it's not like I haven't been around these things before. Draco says the diary was one. Which means I was possessed for a whole year by a Horcrux."

"All the more reason you shouldn't have to be put through anything like this again," Hermione tried to say, but Luna quickly shook her head.

"I know the risks, and I understand them," Luna said evenly, "And I accept them. I'm not a child anymore. You don't need to protect me. I can fight, the same as you."

"So you want to join us on your mission?" Ron asked disbelievingly. "Draco, are you really sure she's ready for that?"

"Completely," Draco lied, and was rewarded by Luna's effervescent smile. "She's ready for this."

"I want to hear about everything that's happened so far," Luna said earnestly, and with a heavy sigh, Hermione beckoned her to sit beside her.

"Is she really mature enough for this?" Ron sidled over to ask Draco in sotto voce, but his whisper carried across the courtyard right to Luna's ears.

"I am if you are, Ronald," she responded without hesitation to a sputtering Ron, and that was that. Harry picked up the apple he'd been cutting, and haltingly, Hermione began to unfold the grisly tale of their trail of mistakes.

They had finished breakfast and gotten to sniping again over Draco going rogue telling Luna, before Luna cut them off with the observation, "You all do know tomorrow is Christmas Eve."

"No, it can't be," said Harry. "It's only the middle of December." Draco had thought the same. But no, Luna said it was the 23rd, and as the one amongst them who'd actually been living in something like civilization, they had to concede to her point.

"See, Luna, this is why it won't be fun to go with us," Hermione sighed. "You'll have a bleak Christmas with us here at L'Infern in the snow."

"You aren't coming back to Xaphan for Christmas?" Luna asked in surprise, unusually outraged by her standards. "I've been telling everyone I was sure you'd be back, just for a proper Christmas."

And times like these, Draco had to fear Ron had been right about her level of maturity. "Are you being serious right now?" Harry asked incredulously. "Hasn't Draco told you, Professor Dumbledore gave me a mission, and we can't go back until we've accomplished it-"

"Who says?" Luna countered, practically vibrating with her delighted conviction she was right. "It would do everyone at Xaphan a world of good to see you're all alright. And maybe it would do you all some good to see them. Remind you what you're fighting *for*." Luna saw the four doubtful stares cast her way, and added guilelessly, "Just for Christmas. After that, we could go off wherever we want."

"They wouldn't let us leave again," Ron said heatedly, and when Luna disputed that, he earned a round of his friends' laughter by exclaiming, "You don't know my mother!"

"And they'd want to know about our mission," Harry added, but Luna seemed to have an answer for everything.

"Then we just wouldn't tell them."

"And what about the Horcrux?" Hermione said, cutting to the heart of why they really couldn't go. "How could we just take the Horcrux back to Xaphan?"

"Wearing it under our clothes," Luna said, "And alternating between ourselves, like Draco said you've been doing."

For the first time, as inspiration struck, Hermione seemed to be tempted by it. "You know, there's a chance Dumbledore could have left the Sword of Gryffindor for Draco somewhere in Xaphan."

"'Mione, are you actually considering this?" Ron said in disbelief. "If Mum catches hold of me, she'll never let me out of her clutches again!" Ron had an uncanny way of making Molly

Weasley sound like Nagini.

"If your mother is the greatest hazard of returning to Xaphan for a day or two," Hermione said pointedly, "Then maybe it is something we should consider after all."

"It really could be Xaphan where Dumbledore left it. I am the heir to the place," Draco put in. "If he meant to put it somewhere important to me, somewhere he knew I'd be looking, he could have hardly picked a better place." Draco wasn't sure if he was really convincing himself, or if the lure of seeing certain people again was simply too strong for him.

"If you really think so," Harry said, perhaps driven by motives similar to Draco's, "Then we have no choice but to go back and see. A visit for Christmas provides a cover for that."

"Great," Ron said gloomily. "I hope you all miss me once my mother has me chained too deep in the dungeons of Xaphan to be found."

"Oh, Ronald," Luna said chipperly. "You know we'd come and rescue you from the dungeons!"

So Luna joining up resulted quite quickly in a reversal of direction, from L'Infern to the warmth and comfort of Xaphan. Draco could only selfishly commend himself for the decision to bring her in, if this was what her presence did for them. After all, there was a certain member of his nine names we was planning to die for, in roughly five or six months. The least Draco could do was check in on the recipient of that sacrifice.

Not to mention, Sirius and Remus deserved a Christmas together with Harry and Draco there, the first one together with their official new family, just as much as Dobby deserved to see friends for Christmas. And there was Millie, and how much this much time immersed in the side of the light was rendering her homicidal. That was a situation to check on. He had abandoned them all there without him, confident in their ability to look after themselves. Time to see how well they'd managed their side of the bargain.

On the morning of Christmas Eve, they took advantage of the wide open space of the central courtyard at L'Infern for some dueling practice, to start schooling Luna up. She claimed she'd learned a great deal from the Xaphan dueling master Sirius these past months, but Draco still felt the need to check and see how she acquitted herself, like one final test for her fitness to join them.

It was hard not to enter a bit into the Christmas spirit already, though, with Draco taking it easy on her to prolong the duel, and both of their flying and blocked spells sending so much snow flying every which way. It turned to an outright snowball fight when Ron sent a snowball flying in from the so-called viewer's gallery to the side beside a statue, making Draco lose his focus and sputter, while Harry and Hermione howled with laughter.

"See, Luna, in a duel," Ron called, taking on an instructor's tone, "You have to expect the unexpected," and earned further laughter.

"Take that, Draco!" Luna called merrily, and used her magic to throw not a Depulso or Flipendo in his direction, but a series of glimmering snowballs. Draco was not slow in joining her in their magical snow fight, picking up and compacting balls of the glittering white stuff wordlessly with the ill-used talon wand, before sending them to smash at Luna, or fly against her own mustered artillery in a brilliant explosion of white.

"Go, Draco!" Harry called faithfully, while Ron and Hermione raised their voices treacherously for Luna. Draco turned to blow Harry the kiss he deserved and got caught squarely in the back of the head by a huge gust of snow.

"Damn!" Draco gasped, nearly losing his footing on the courtyard's slick cobblestone beneath the snow, while Luna celebrated with adorable little pumps of her fists. He had the brief dark thought it would be better if Neville was there to cheer for her like Harry was for him, but that didn't keep him from trying to keep up everyone's spirits with a spurt of his own whirling snow clouds put into effect.

Luna shrieked and tried to dodge around them ineffectually, getting powdered snow all over her long hair and cloak, before she sent a burst of air that sent the clouds reflecting back into a sputtering Draco's face. Then Luna floated a great mass of snow his way at breakneck pace-

Except it never hit, at least not at Draco. "Gah!" exclaimed the blue fur-clad figure that had just Portkeyed in between them, as Luna's full load of snow caught him squarely in the face. It sent him flying, where he tumbled down face-first into one of the courtyard's heaviest drifts of snow to cushion the fall.

"Professor Lockhart!" Hermione exclaimed, running over kindly to help him. She picked him up, getting him by his hands and dragging him from the heap of snow, while he indignantly wiped at his face and tossed his head back for the sake of his wet hair. Yes, it was Gilderoy Lockhart who had most assuredly arrived at L'Infern.

He sputtered something incoherent about "Miss Lovegood... the indignity of snowball fights, really... when I only came over to surprise you..." He only focused on the actual person helping, realizing it wasn't Luna, once his hands had taken a quick intense account of the state of his long golden hair. Once he did, his jaw unhinged in comical astonishment. "My! Why, if it isn't the estimable Miss Granger! Of all people to run into at L'Infern! I thought you were off on some secret mission, very hush-hush, with Mr. Potter..."

"There he is," Hermione pointed, indicating Harry with a sweep of her arm, and Gilderoy started, seeming to forget now the wave of snow that had felled him in his excitable state.

"Harry Potter! A sight for sore eyes, to be sure, for our side- so good to see you all in one piece, my boy- and Mr. Weasley with him, of course, his loyal stalwart companion..." Hermione coughed slightly at that overzealous description of Ron. "And with you must be..."

"Here he is, Professor," Luna said, going over to Draco's side and making to hug her snow-covered cousin, but Gilderoy beat her to it.

"DRACO! Oh, Draco," Gilderoy gushed with appalling effusiveness, clasping Draco in his arms with a desperate fierceness. "Oh, I can't tell you how good it is to see you again, our

Draco..."

"Guess we all know who his favorite is," muttered Ron.

"You look well," Gilderoy said breathlessly, keeping Draco by the shoulders and leaning back to inspect him. Thankfully, the fang marks from Nagini were hidden under Draco's robe sleeve, just as Ron had the locket hidden under his sweater, hanging close to his chest.

"Gilderoy, you look well, too," Draco said, and it was true. Gilderoy looked better in a way than he could ever remember seeing him, hair grown longer and tan lingering from the summer months, with a full-hearted effusiveness that testified to how very much the man was full of life now. "I missed you too."

"Oh, but what could you possibly doing at L'Infern?" Gilderoy fretted, and Draco smiled, knowing the joy that would explode from Gilderoy at his next words.

"Oh, you know," Draco drawled nonchalantly. "Just on our way home for Christmas."

Draco picked himself up off the ground to the sound of waves, and a wind whipping in his face that showcased how very cold it must be, the winter sea before them. He hadn't wanted to risk arriving in the midst of people right away, so he'd set the Portkey to Xaphan to arrive at one of the beaches beyond the wall. Luna clapped her hands in delight at their arrival, and Draco put his arm around her shoulder, the other around Harry's, as they turned from the water to face the towers of Xaphan.

They seemed to rise taller than ever, with the distant forms of gargoyles adorning the obsidian lengths of stone. Xaphan was clearly in a greater state of repair than they'd left it, with no visible rubble or ruins at the back even, at least from a distance. Gilderoy was humble enough not to pipe up about how his castle-building classes must have contributed to that, but surely it was so, the effort of many more hands multiplying the reversal of damage to the castle.

A castle it was, now, with darker stone than Hogwarts, and slightly smaller mass overall, but a castle. It loomed before the onlooker from the water as a true bastion now the way Hogwarts did, almost something like the feeling of seeing Hogwarts for the first time from the boats when he was a first-year the first time. Almost, if not quite. And it was something, to think of the gap between Draco's first vision of this place in fifth year and the true fortress it seemed now. Dumbledore had made no mistake, entrusting the revival of this place to Sirius and Remus. They had done their duty admirably, and today Xaphan stood before them like a sentinel against the threat of darkness. If only it could contain what they most needed to combat the darkness, the Sword of Gryffindor.

When Gilderoy led them through the wall and closer to the edifice, Draco could see there were fairy lights up everywhere they could have possibly be hung, even on a back corner like this. It was most assuredly Christmas at Xaphan.

"We don't want to start a riot just introducing Harry Potter in everyone's midst," Gilderoy said thoughtfully, with unusual sense. "There will need to be some official announcement. Perhaps at dinner tonight?"

"An official arrival? Like celebrities? We're not the Weird Sisters, come by on a famous world tour," Ron complained, but Hermione nodded.

"Professor Lockhart is right," she said, a sentence she didn't seem to have expected she would ever have occasion to say. "Harry will cause pandemonium. Everyone must be counting on him so much as the symbol of our side in the war..."

"Stop it," Harry said, ducking his head embarrassedly, and Draco poked at his side adoringly.

"It's true," Draco said with a roguish grin. "You're the most famous man in the wizarding world, Potter, time to act like it." Most famous, perhaps, save Voldemort, but at least you were allowed to say Harry's name. "We should Apparate to see..."

"Sirius and Remus," Harry finished, where Draco had been about to say Severus, but he gave Harry the right to choose. It was his moment, the grand returning hero amidst his faithful allies, like an apparition of hope right when the days were getting the shortest and darkest.

"Sirius and Remus. Would they still be in bed at this hour? Do you remember where their chambers were?" Hermione asked Ron, who shook his head. Gilderoy took them both by the arm.

"I'll summon them and we can wait for them," Gilderoy offered, and he Side-Alonged Ron and Hermione, while Harry took Draco and Luna to the rooms of the men Draco so wanted and dreaded to see.

Sirius and Remus had decked out their rooms in Gryffindor colors, but otherwise, they were surprisingly muted for something Sirius had been involved with. Perhaps the austerity shown by the plain hardwood floors and dressers and bedframe was something that belonged to wartime. Draco felt uncomfortable intruding into their inner world, but there was no better place to wait for them, and the fireplace going where Gilderoy lit it gave the small chamber a warm glow.

Sirius was the first to arrive, dirtied and dusted from the dueling class he'd been holding right before lunchtime. Tall, dark, and handsome as ever in red with gold appliqués, like a simple version of what he'd worn to his trial, he whirled on Gilderoy immediately once he was inside the room, complaining about what could possibly be so important for Gilderoy to summon him like this interrupting his class. Then there was a voice, one so beloved to Sirius, it was no wonder he turned and immediately embraced its owner Harry, who was asking if he'd had a good dueling class.

Draco was grinning already, in hopes of a similar reception as for Harry, and Sirius did not disappoint. "Draco!" he gasped, going from Harry to enfold Draco in his outstretched arms as well. "Bloody hell, you're both alive..."

"Was there ever any doubt?" Draco asked archly, blasé as you like, except from the wild look on Sirius's face, it seemed his bit of levity was misplaced. Sirius looked to have very much been in doubt.

It was a whirl of embraces and questions then, from both sides. Harry asked why Sirius hadn't used the two-way mirror if he was afraid for his adopted sons' safety, and Sirius went on about how damned Remus was adamant it was only for emergencies. "Would you like it if we checked in more often?" Draco offered, to the heartfelt nodding of Sirius, knowing Sirius wouldn't be able to tell where they were if they did it from inside the tent.

What were they doing having classes on Christmas Eve? Yes, Sirius told them, believe it or not, for the students that had stayed for Christmas at Xaphan, certain essential classes like dueling and DADA continued on every day except Christmas.

Draco forced a smile. "That makes it sound like you're training up an army."

"That is rather the idea," said Remus, standing in the threshold to his room, regarding his two prodigal sons with an unreadable expression. He looked good, like Sirius did, in his plain robes with his tidy brown hair, but he seemed visibly stressed, dark circles under his kind eyes that spoke of restless nights.

"Professor Lupin is the best Defense professor we've ever had," Luna enthused, waving her arms in the air. "Oh, look, Professor, they're back, isn't it wonderful?"

"Yes, Remus, isn't it?" Sirius said pointedly, jerking his head expectantly from where Remus stood to where the cluster of hugs was going on. But Remus seemed unmoved.

"Harry. Draco," Remus said firmly, in a voice very much the adult addressing children. "You should have spoken to us before you left Xaphan."

"They're here now, Remus, isn't that what matters?" Sirius whined, poking his head over Harry's shoulder where he had gone to hug him from behind. He was summarily ignored.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, meeting Remus's disappointed gaze bravely, "But it would have been too hard."

Remus seemed to relax at last, from the emotion in Harry's voice if nothing else. "Oh, I know. And I understand why you've felt you had to leave, for this mission Dumbledore has given you. But you went about it in the wrong way, going behind our backs, I hope you know-"

Draco decided to try his luck, and raced forward and hugged Remus, that steady presence of logic and goodness, and he somehow found himself not rebuffed. Sirius seized his chance too and dragged Remus and Draco into a group hug with them, all four of the family pushed together. Draco felt Remus's rough palm gently smoothing Draco's hair out of his eyes for him, and almost had to choke back tears. It did suddenly feel like they were home.

"So might I inquire as to how your mission has gone? I'm not asking what it is, but how it is. Surely not finished yet, or we would have heard?" Remus ventured, the first to withdraw from the lengthy collective embrace. His eyes swept at last to the merely watching Ron and

Hermione, keenly evaluative of whatever state they must seem in. His eyes focused on the bags that the students had brought still trailing behind them. "This won't be a long visit, will it?"

"What?" went Sirius, who seemed to have expected this all to be a fairytale ending of sorts, but Remus took Sirius's hand and was unrelenting.

"You're here for Christmas, but just Christmas. You mean to go again once it's over," Remus surmised from their guilty expressions, and Luna had, as ever, her own unique sense of timing.

"Yes, and they've agreed to let me go with them this time!" she cried out. "Oh, Professor Lupin, isn't that the most thrilling thing you've ever heard?"

Remus's face turned from judgment to protective panic. "Luna? Surely not Luna..."

It appeared that with Harry and Draco's guardians, they would be in for a long day of it.

Draco slid his way into Severus's new chambers with the invisibility cloak shielding him from view, the dungeons of Xaphan in truth far easier to navigate than Hogwarts'. Potions was not one of those subjects deemed indispensable for the training up of young witches and wizards, so Severus would be giving no classes over the winter break, he was told. He found Severus at a cauldron, stirring some potion unidentifiable to him, so he was very careful to wait until Severus put the ladle down before making his grand appearance. He threw the invisibility cloak off right before Severus's eyes.

Yet he was not rewarded with the slack-jawed amazement he had expected at his sudden arrival. Severus hardly blinked. "Hello, godfather!" Draco cried. "I've arrived! Where is the shock and awe? I was expecting shock and awe."

"Gilderoy already informed me you and your companions had returned to Xaphan," Severus said dryly, much to Draco's disappointment, and neatly dodged Draco's subsequent attempt at a hug. "Kindly unhand me, burdensome godson."

Just the sound of those words was enough to make Draco's heart smile in gratified recognition, what passed from Severus really as affection. "Nope!" Draco said happily, and outdid Severus with his young strength until Severus at last was forced to submit to a hell of a squeezing of a hug. Even if an objective observer might have said Severus did not fight it terribly hard.

"When you told me this summer that you had a mission from Dumbledore upon which the wizarding world depended," Severus intoned, "One that rendered it necessary to abandon all of your allies and go out into hiding, one naturally expected that this mission would be followed to its close. And not, as I fear I suspect, broken off in the middle for Yuletide recreation."

"You fear correctly," Draco laughed, thrilled to be seen through so thoroughly by his incredible godfather. Severus was also quick to notice the HJP necklace above Draco's cashmere sweater, and note that Draco must be continuing in his inane attempts at what passed for romance with Potter, to still be sporting that swill. Draco happily informed him that yes, he and Harry were as in love as one could be, and that was not liable to change anytime soon. Severus very impressively refrained from any of the gagging his expression suggested at that juncture.

He turned back to his potion for a minute, then, and Draco took the time to inspect Severus's chambers. The silver doe tapestry Draco had given him at Hogwarts was lost, of course, as was the patched fireplace Draco had once destroyed, but there was a new fireplace alight with green flames- Draco understood they were continuing the house system the same at Xaphan this year, though who knew how they were doing the Sorting- and there was a tapestry near enough to it to offer enticing potential flammable opportunities. What astonished Draco was that the tapestry was as bright and welcoming as Severus was quite proudly not, showcasing a daylight meadow full of an unnaturally large bounty of golden roses.

"Is that from Gilderoy?" Draco cawed, and Severus turned to him with ill temper at the question.

"As it happens, yes, not that it is any concern of yours," Severus said smoothly, with an almost suspicious level of composure. "It was a gift. Hideous as it is, I was not rude enough to discard it."

Draco remembered Severus tossing a very similar- if not identical- tapestry from his secret admirer into his fireplace in second year, and stifled a real, incredulous giggle. *Since when do you care about upsetting someone else's precious feelings,* he wanted to ask, especially Gilderoy's, but he did not want to put his Christmas Eve arrival on a sour note, as Severus surely would render it in his defensiveness. "I like it," was all Draco confined himself to saying, and even that much earned him a death stare the likes of which he had only been able to sorely miss in the months away from Severus.

"Will we have Christmas together tomorrow morning at your tree?" Draco cooed, pleased at the nostalgic sight of Severus's small tree on the cold stone glowing with green fireflies, under which several golden presents indeed rested. Severus looked at him sternly beneath his eyebrows.

"Surely you will be spending Christmas with your lawful guardians, and sparing me the impediment of your presence," he said smoothly, and Draco could only insist gleefully how very much he was going to enjoy spending Christmas with his godfather, and he would be inviting Luna, oh, and perhaps Gilderoy?

Severus regarded him balefully. "Tell me, Draco. Have you killed anyone since we last spoke?"

Well. It was the most bracing question he had been asked at one of these reunions, if not rather fair given his track record. "No," Draco said, trying to repress a sigh at the thought of having fought Aunt Bella and letting her remain still above the ground. "No, I haven't."

Severus did not comment on this, or on Draco's self-invitation to Christmas with him, but Draco supposed from a turn of his lips that he was pleased, before he turned away to bottling his work.

Draco's first stop searching for the Sword of Gryffindor was the place where he had found so many of Xaphan's hidden things. He'd used it himself to temporarily hide the purloined Mirror of Erised, when the library tower had been Gilderoy's dwellings and the secret area his responsibility. As it was, now, Draco had to sneak past a smattering of students in the invisibility cloak to make it to the entrance there.

"Toujours pur," he whispered, and the passage opened to him.

What he found was paintings by Dantanian Noir, dragons and Astarte Noir, and the sole remnants of Dantanian's notebooks that either Grindelwald or Severus hadn't burned. He examined the passage as long as he could, going as deep as it went, and poking away at any stones that looked outturned. But it yielded up a fat load of nothing. If the Sword of Gryffindor was on Xaphan, it wasn't here. Eventually, he had to return to Sirius and Remus as promised.

Sirius and Remus snuck them to Professor McGonagall's office out of sight of any students, the invisibility cloak doing its job in two heats, once Harry and Draco and once Ron and Hermione. McGonagall was astonished at the sight of all of them, clearly, in a way that made Draco wonder how many here at Xaphan had not fully expected their party to ever come back. She was graceful as ever in that astonishment, though, and while she refrained from any embraces, she looked almost tempted in Harry's case, who anyone with eyes knew had always been her favorite.

If it wasn't Draco's imagination, it seemed her new job had aged her beyond the time that had passed, but she was still as prim and perfect as ever. She peered over at them over spectacles, in what was an odder setting than Draco had expected. McGonagall's office hardly seemed a headmistress's office at first at all, which Draco wondered at until he realized the lack of walls and a ceiling full of headmasters' paintings. He'd been inside Carrow's version of the Hogwarts office and seen them all still there, after all, which irked him somewhat at their disloyalty, as if paintings could just pick themselves off the walls and transport themselves to the side they chose.

It was still a magnificent office, attired in house-neutral shades of glimmering purple and spotless white, with McGonagall in a great violet high-backed chair that set her above everyone else in the room. There were chairs facing the large mahogany desk, but they ignored them. Her visitors lingered standing, awaiting her judgment.

As headmistress and the clear authority here, she saw fit to question them more heavily on their mission than anyone had seen fit to so far. Sirius and Remus shifted as uncomfortably as the four students did, as she inquired point-blank as to what had been keeping them away for so long. Only she dared ask squarely what their mission was, and more than once, despite Harry repeating that Dumbledore had left it with him alone.

"Surely whatever it is could be better accomplished with all of our assistance," McGonagall said logically, and Remus and Sirius exchanged glances. Draco still didn't know how Severus had talked Remus and Sirius into accepting their absence to begin with.

"I'm sorry, Headmistress," Harry said, lifting his head, the unfortunate but courageous spokesperson for their group. "But it just isn't something I can tell anyone. If we do this, we're going to have to do this on our own."

"After Christmas has passed, though," McGonagall said, a cattish look of amusement crossing her eyes behind their spectacles.

"After Christmas has passed," Harry agreed, with a tentative smile.

They were told to come into the hall on cue, at the signal of McGonagall's speech arriving at their names. They were left lingering just out of sight while Remus, Sirius, and Luna took their seats.

Xaphan had been decked out for Christmastime to stunning effect at night, all of the winding fairy lights glittering over the tall towers and foreboding gargoyles and sending endless reflections of light off the obsidian, making the very stone let out a moonstone glow. Inside, lights were in similar overwhelming abundance, with holly lining the dark walls and wreaths bestowed on every tall dark door. Small pines lined the entrance to the school as well as the Great Hall, and Sirius had assured them Hagrid had outdone himself with a dozen larger Christmas trees for the Great Hall inside, just like at Hogwarts. All in all, it was a sight Aunt Bella would be sore to miss. Draco tried not to imagine what Christmas would look like this year at Malfoy Manor.

With how difficult and onerous it was to import anything to Xaphan, the extravagance they'd still managed to achieve was incredible. Draco wondered at such effort at Christmas adornment and merriment, for a place where the faculty openly admitted they were training students for war- in a time so dark for the wizarding world, too. Except maybe that was all the more reason to do it, the holidays needed more than ever as Xaphan shone out as the wizarding world's one beacon of hope. The only beacon, that was, save Harry Potter.

All this talk of celebrity and a grand fracas upon his arrival must have spooked Harry, who was fidgeting in the splendid red and gold robes Sirius had loaned him. "Hey, Harry, it'll be alright, they'll all be happy to see us," said Ron, in his finest dress robes and Weasley sweater. He gave Harry a pallish punch to the shoulder, but Harry just seemed to flinch and withdraw more.

"Are you scared of facing all those people?" Hermione asked sympathetically, in her cranberry-red Christmas dress and matching shoes, pretty as a picture. Draco wished he had his Polaroid camera to capture the four of them in this moment, resplendent in their best awaiting to be introduced back to their side.

"You won't have to do it alone," Draco said clad in his old wispy silver robes from Heart of Winter celebrations past, adjusted for his larger figure, along with the matching diamonds at

his wrist and throat- that was, above the immovable HJP and the locket hanging underneath his shirt. He reached out instinctively for Harry's hand, only to decide Harry might need stronger encouragement, and leaned over to give Harry a full-blooded kiss.

Ron and Hermione made fond exasperated noises, only to start and try to pull them apart once McGonagall's voice was heard uttering, "Last but certainly not least, we have four guests to welcome back to Xaphan."

"That's us!" Ron hissed, and Draco reluctantly parted from Harry.

"Alright, here we go," said Draco, and helped Hermione push open the two massive doors to the purple-draped Great Hall.

"Ron Weasley!" McGonagall announced, as they let go of the doors and made their way inside. "Draco Black! Hermione Granger!"

The Great Hall had the promised trees, threatening to swallow up the tables with their exuberance, in a smaller hall than Hogwarts'. Draco's gaze tilted up and saw hundreds of lit white candles floating above them. The impression of suddenly being in a room with so many people after so long was dizzying for Draco, let alone what it must have been for Harry, so Draco damned anyone who disliked it ad took Harry's hand as they walked forward and McGonagall called out at last, "Harry Potter!"

Noise erupted like a spurting fountain, all eyes whipping backwards to the four returning heroes. There were gasps and pointed fingers. One Hufflepuff girl they passed immediately started crying. No one seemed to know what to do for a moment, as the four steadily advanced through the tables towards the staff table at the front of the room.

There were five tables, not four. The fifth was filled up with adults- fugitives, along with perhaps some Christmas visitors, Draco realized, seeing a clump of Weasleys there beside Xenophilius Lovegood, close to Aberforth Dumbledore and, guilt-inducingly enough, the Longbottoms. That table was the first to start the applause, Arthur Weasley leaping to his feet and pounding his hands together. The fugitive table took up the applause, rising to their feet with him.

Then the students were standing up too, clapping their hands together with many screeching, banging at the floor or their tables. Draco's eyes met a stomping Dean Thomas at Gryffindor, and he had the surreal urge to go forward and ask if he knew what kind of record Arsenal had this season.

The standing ovation continued until they reached the front of the room beneath the staff table, not abating even amongst the staff save a stolid Severus. Harry glanced at Draco in shocked awe at the response they were getting, and then McGonagall called out, "It is true! Harry Potter and his friends live! They are with us tonight!"

The roar of sound then, even from some student tables largely emptied by the holidays, was the loudest Draco had ever heard in his life, bar none. More students had started crying by the time McGonagall beckoned them up to the dais, while all through the hall, the very Christmas trees shook with the explosion of exultation. Harry Potter was home.

The Moonstone Sanctum

Harry had no inspiring speech prepared, but he didn't need one. His humble *Thank you* seemed more than enough for his audience.

The minute they were let down to the floor level, Ron's parents had run over to them, enfolding Ron in a passionate hug while Molly Weasley sniffled. Hermione was seized by a shrieking, shaking Ginny, while Harry traded embraces with every member there of Dumbledore's Army. Draco was congratulated by Flitwick, before he was bowled over by Hagrid sprinting down from the high table too, while all about the hall, sounds of disbelieving glee still filled the air.

Draco was let go by Hagrid to face a quiet, somber-faced Millie. She did not reach out to touch him. "So," she intoned. "You're alive." Draco could not make out whether she found that to be a good or a bad thing.

"Yes," Draco said, hopeful that was good news for her, and then Aberforth Dumbledore inserted himself between them, making far more positive noises as to the fact that Draco's survival remained intact. In the corner of his eye, Draco could see Millie going back to the sparse Slytherin table for her dinner.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione all went to go sit at Gryffindor, and Draco caught Luna's eye at Ravenclaw, meaning to join her there. But Harry dragged Draco by his waist to Gryffindor with him, definitive enough about where Draco was to sit that Draco could make no certain objection. So he settled into Gryffindor with them, and began to tuck in to the house elves' finest fare- it made one wonder how Dobby fared downstairs in the kitchen- while constantly people came up to greet them, mainly Harry, and to offer their best wishes.

First among them was the unfamiliar figure of a middle-aged man who introduced himself as Ted Tonks, apparently on the run from the Ministry here. *Oh,* Draco thought with a sort of sluggishness induced by the pie he was currently tucking into. *You're supposed to be dead sometime, aren't you?*

Mr. Tonks seemed in a buoyant mood, and the reason for that was not just the return of Xaphan's heroes. It became clear when Draco was hugged from the side by a figure bearing a sizable baby bump, which turned out to belong to his cousin Tonks. Speaking of the supposed-to-be-dead, she was flanked at her side by Cedric Diggory, who was delivering his fondest sympathies to Harry. Conversation quickly revealed that Cedric was, naturally, the father, and that there would be a wedding for the two of them very soon.

Draco gave out his congratulations the same as the others did, all the while wondering to himself what insane twists of fate his interference had wreaked in the red line. Here was one before him, visible and inarguable, and he supposed it just behooved him now to be happy for them, strange as the pair seemed to him.

It was something, after all, to look up at the staff table and see Professor Burbage getting in her cups and chattering away with Professor Sinistra, given what fate had befallen her in the

blue loop. Draco was overwhelmingly doing more good than harm.

That was, apart from Theo. But he didn't like to think of that.

Theo was who he thought of instantly as he laid eyes upon a troubled Millie, sat upon the floor of the observatory with Ginny hovering above her anxiously. Draco was in the invisibility cloak, gone to check one of the most likely places the sword might be hidden, while it was late enough Christmas Eve night that everyone should have been securely in bed, especially the students.

But there were two of them out and about nonetheless, in the renovated observatory that now served as a location for Astronomy classes, despite the one door in it that simply wouldn't open. Millie's back was to that door, preventing Draco from slipping around them, as if he even could have with the spectacle he would make opening the door. He settled in instead to see if they would be there long.

It was hard to tell how long they had been there already. When Ginny settled down on the floor with Millie, Millie pulled away from her touch. "It's nothing, Ginny. I just came here to think."

"I knew you'd be here," Ginny said with a sigh. "You always come here when you're upset. What is it, Mills?"

"Nothing," Millie said obstinately, staring into the distance, which happened to be Draco under the cloak, but he knew for sure she couldn't actually see him. "I just miss my parents."

Ginny had to be able to tell Millie was lying, if it was half as obvious to her as it was to Draco, but she didn't argue the point. "I'm sorry they left you behind," Ginny said softly, red hair shining like a beacon in the filtered moonlight. "I'm here, though. I mean, if that helps."

"It does," Millie said quickly, but she didn't reach out to touch her girlfriend where she was waiting for her. "It does."

"You ought to be in bed for Christmas tomorrow, though," Ginny prodded, "And yes, I know I should be too, but I have to drag you to bed, then, don't I, you great ornery Hippogriff?"

Millie didn't crack a smile. "You don't, really. Go sleep, Gin. I'll be fine."

Ginny just hovered beside her, seeming to ache with the need to help without the least idea how. "Isn't it great that Harry and Draco and everyone is back?"

The shadow that crossed Millie's face then sent a chill through Draco's blood. Suddenly, he was a minute amount less sure she couldn't somehow see through the cloak. "Yes, it's great," Millie intoned blankly, and Ginny risked her displeasure by reaching up and touching Millie's hair, smoothing her fingers through it and stroking Millie's cheek. This time at least, Millie didn't stop her. "Oh, I see what you want," Millie said in a low tone, and Ginny flushed red in the dim light.

"No, I really want to make sure you're okay, that's all," Ginny said earnestly, but Millie turned a crooked smile onto her that couldn't have been more knowing.

"You wanted some of this, I knew you did," Millie said, and pulled Ginny onto her broad lap, smothering her girlfriend's protests with a hard, intent kiss. Ginny made mewling noises and soon submitted greedily to Millie's attentions, hesitating and then kissing her back with matching passion. The sound of their lips moving together was almost eerie in the absolute silence that surrounded them, like the two of them were adrift in space-time away from anyone else, except of course for their ultimate voyeur.

Draco began to back away from them, not wanting to intrude in this, but he had to be very careful not to let his footsteps sound. His heart beat faster when Ginny breathed against Millie's lips, "You would tell me if something was really wrong, wouldn't you, darling?" and Millie just responded,

"Shut up and kiss me, Weasley."

It seemed Draco was not the only one liable to use sex to solve his relationship problems. He managed to sneak out of the observatory unnoticed, keeping his breathing level, though the sound of Millie's tired voice lingered in his ears, lying to the girl she loved.

Draco went to search the area around Dumbledore's tomb, as if Dumbledore could have somehow placed it there posthumously, and naturally came up empty-handed. By now it was getting very dark, as the places Draco had searched were piling up, and nowhere yielding dividends. He resolved to search the observatory in thoroughness tomorrow, as the one place that truly stuck out as possible remaining. Then he went to find Harry for bed.

The adults had somehow been gracious enough to grant Harry and Draco their own private room for their stay at Xaphan, with Ron and Hermione nearby thankfully in rooms of their own. So it was that Draco awoke in Harry's arms on Christmas morning. It put him in prime position to deliver his own special present to his boyfriend for Christmas. Harry didn't seem to mind the lack of a formal gift by the time Draco was done with him.

Christmas morning with Remus, Sirius, and Harry was a rather desultory, comical affair, with no presents in sight save for Sirius and Remus's for each other. Sirius had gotten Remus a set of fashionable new ties. Remus had gotten Sirius a small but extremely sharp-looking curved knife.

Christmas with Severus, Luna, and Gilderoy was more complicated, with a fraught tension in the air between the two professors once Gilderoy arrived. While Severus was as unfestive as ever in dark billowing robes, Gilderoy made a striking sight out of his blue fur for once, dressed in golden robes with all-white clothes underneath, matching the presents beneath the tree. All the presents turned out to be from Gilderoy to Severus, presents that made Severus increasingly incensed but apparently unwilling to say so: lavish magical jewelry Severus would clearly never wear- Severus only ever wore the turquoise ring Draco had made him in first year- along with more practical fine copper potion-making equipment, and a book, improbably enough, about the process of grieving.

Severus said a tight thank you after each one, sneaking glances nervously at Draco- only to start slightly when Gilderoy would touch him lightly on the side or thigh, smiling at him in a way that demanded attention. Luna gave a whisper-giggle to Draco the first time it happened, but when Severus didn't angrily brush Gilderoy away, Draco motioned her quiet with a finger to his mouth, and the two students watched their professors with perfect innocence from them on.

A hunch made Draco hang back after Luna and him had been summarily dismissed from Severus's chambers, seeing Gilderoy linger. Now he was the deliberate voyeur, sneaking his way back into the rooms under the invisibility cloak as soon as he had been sent out. He was not disappointed by the sight that awaited him.

Gilderoy was sat by the tree, rounding up Severus's presents and piling them gracefully for him, while Severus paced the chamber, radiating his dark energy out to every wall. Gilderoy seemed unperturbed, only looking up to give Severus a slight smile.

That smile seemed to trigger Severus to at last speak his mind. "What did you think you were doing, Gilderoy?" he asked silkily, and Gilderoy got up to blink at him guilelessly. They cast as stark a contrast as ever, light and dark, white and black, so much it seemed almost impossible to behold them in a room together, let alone facing each other so intently like this.

"What do you mean, Severus?" Gilderoy asked, innocent as you like, and Severus crossed the room towards him with an impassioned look on his face.

"I mean, what were you doing just now, touching me like that," Severus exhaled. "You knew what you were doing to me."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Gilderoy, and Severus brought up a finger to his own lips to shush Gilderoy. Gilderoy fidgeted back, lips snapping shut as if he was mesmerized by the gesture.

"You know exactly what you're doing to me, don't you?" Severus sighed, and leaned forward to breathe in the scent of Gilderoy's long golden hair. "Of course you do. You evil little thing, Gilderoy. You're always tormenting me when you know I can't react." Gilderoy inhaled sharply at the words, body seeming attuned to the slightest word of movement of Severus's, and Severus did not step back, face sliding through Gilderoy's hair to press his lips to the side of Gilderoy's face. "You presume so much, on your power over me," he whispered.

"I don't have any-" Gilderoy began, only for Severus to place his finger this time to Gilderoy's lips, slow and firm.

"Ssh..." Severus breathed, keeping Gilderoy still like a frozen rabbit in a hunter's sights. "Ssh, golden one. I know you. I know what you want when you do these things to me."

Then Severus's lips kissed their way over from Gilderoy's cheek to Gilderoy's lips. Gilderoy breathed out against Severus's soft brush against his mouth, seeming not to dare to react, until Severus's tongue snaked out into his open mouth, and Gilderoy kissed him back with everything in him. "Yes, Severus, I want you..."

So Draco knew what he was witnessing now. It was perhaps the most miraculous sight he had ever seen with his own eyes. His own godfather and another human being, together. But so it was, as real as Draco's hand before him underneath the cloak.

Gilderoy made a whining noise and Severus knotted both hands in Gilderoy's long hair, tugging and making Gilderoy purr. "Brat," Severus said affectionately, and then kissed him again, and Draco knew it was past his time to go.

Once he left Severus's chambers, he went the way Luna had taken him on the way: he climbed first to the ground level above the dungeons, then crossed through the greenhouses on his way towards the main building. What he saw took the smile from his face.

He found Luna in the way, sitting on the ground of the frosty greenhouse not doing or saying a thing. Then he realized she was staring up at the flowers growing above her. The bright red-pink Asiatic lilies there were Eurydice lilies, like Neville had surprised her with once. Draco would never forget that day when he had first learned the myth of Eurydice.

"Luna?" Draco said carefully, crouching down beside her, feeling like Ginny must have felt with Millie last night. "Luna, what is it?"

"Neville started growing these in the greenhouse for me," Luna said thickly, "Before he was taken," and Draco saw her wipe tears from her light eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Luna," Draco said, sitting down on the cold ground and embracing her. He felt he had traded more hugs in the past twenty-four hours than his entire life, but this one was the most important. "I know how much you must miss him."

"Where do you think he is right now?" Luna whimpered, and Draco tightened his grasp on her, which only loosed a fresh round of unconstrained sobs.

"Hogwarts," Draco said flatly, "I'm almost sure. Hogwarts, where we can't go. Not yet."

Luna laughed bitterly, a strange sound coming from her. "What kind of Christmas do you think he's having at Hogwarts?"

Draco had in truth been wondering the same, but he wouldn't have ever dared voice it to Luna. "I don't know. I hope it isn't too hard a day for him. I'm sure he knows you're thinking of him and wishing for his safe return-"

"I failed him!" Luna cried, devolving into full hysterics in his arms. She clung to him feverishly, as if he was the only thing keeping her tethered to reality. "I let the Slytherins take him, I let them take him away from me..."

"Luna, it wasn't your fault!" *If anything it was mine, for getting you both involved in that foolhardy mission to steal something that turned out to be fake.* "We all failed that day. But we won't fail forever. We'll get him back, I promise. You're going to get to see him again and tell him how much you love him."

"So much," Luna gasped. "I love him so much. I never really knew how much, until he was gone..."

Draco held Luna close, and let her cry and cry into his arms.

Luna regained her composure eventually, and they left the greenhouse together without any further words, the weight of Draco's perhaps ill-given promise heavy now between them. When he and Luna made their way down to the kitchens, they found Harry, Ron, and Hermione already there, with Harry putting on his best show of elation at the Christmas socks Dobby had knitted him. Draco was soon forced to do the same, with his blue snowman socks, and received a misty-eyed hug from Dobby, who assured him he had held faith the heroes would be home for Christmas.

"How do you find it at Xaphan, Dobby?" Hermione asked, as expected. "Are you being treated well?"

"Dobby is very happy here," Dobby said, only to falter at the last word and say the words he really thought. "Hermione Granger... Dobby is lonely. Dobby is not having friends. And Dobby once had friends, but they are not here with the other house elves from Hogwarts. Wooky and Nissy are still being missing!"

Something fatal twisted in Draco's chest, and led to something reckless. There were some things he had to do before he died, after all, weren't there? "I know what happened to Wooky and Nissy," he admitted, and four alarmed human pairs of heads snapped around towards him.

"Draco," Harry cautioned, laying a hand on his arm, and Draco looked around their deserted corner of the kitchen to be sure there were no elves listening before continuing regardless.

"Draco Black, if you is knowing, you must tell Dobby!" Dobby said, his voice a mix of excitement and fear. Maybe on some level he already knew what was coming, but didn't want to believe it.

What was coming came. "Dobby, I'm sorry. Wooky and Nissy are dead." *I strangled them to death with snakes, without even noticing. It didn't seem particularly important at the time.*

Dobby let out a harsh cry, then Luna offered her shoulder, and Dobby buried his face into her long bright hair and began to sob. After being so distraught over Neville earlier, Luna was now the one comforting someone else. And Dobby seemed sorely in need of comforting, as anyone would be at such awful news.

"No!" Dobby gasped against her hair, face hunched against her, his words muffled but still piercing. "No, they can't be! Wooky and Nissy are not dead!" And Draco regretted it so badly, seeing the state the act had ended up putting Dobby in.

"We're all so sorry, Dobby," Luna offered, hugging him tightly, and Dobby accepted the embrace numbly before pulling away from her. Draco had never seen Dobby like this, like some part of his world had crumbled forever. Guilt leapt up and threatened to strangle at Draco, to loosen his tongue the last bit of the way and give it all away.

"Thank you, Luna Lovegood. But- but- how does Draco Black know?"

Some part of Draco had meant to tell the whole truth, but at a sharp look from Hermione, he found himself lying yet again. "I can't tell you that, Dobby. It's to do with our mission for Dumbledore, we can't give anything away about it, I'm sorry."

Tears ran down Dobby's little face from his big wide marble eyes, terrible to behold. "But- Draco Black is knowing? Draco Black is sure Dobby's friends are dead?"

"Yes," Draco said heavily. "Yes, Dobby, I'm sure. I really am sorry."

Several hours later, Millie came up to him as they were leaving Christmas dinner and said she needed to talk to him. No explanation, just a blunt order of, "The observatory at midnight." Draco experienced a brief rush of self-doubt before reminding himself that Ginny had said the observatory was always where Millie hung out. There was no way Millie could have seen him spying on them, however piercing her gaze looked sometimes. The midnight hour made it mysterious, but Draco still accepted without objection.

In the meantime, he managed to follow Gilderoy out of the hall and to his rooms to talk. Gilderoy's rooms could not be more sparkling and gold, as it turned out. One assumed he and Severus spent most if not all of their time together in Severus's rooms.

"Welcome to my humble abode! And merry Christmas, my young friend. I can't tell you how happy I am to have you here! A spot of tea?"

"That's alright, Gilderoy, I just need to talk to you," Draco said calmingly, and took a seat in a well-loved purple armchair, across from Gilderoy in a matching one in gold. "I'll cut right to the chase, then. What exactly is going on with you and Severus?"

Gilderoy's cornflower-blue eyes went wide in guilty surprise, which he quickly tried to mask. He did a singularly poor job of it. "Well, we're, er- Severus doesn't like the term, but I suppose you could call us friends..."

"Friends or lovers?" Draco asked bluntly, and Gilderoy looked as though if he'd been consuming anything, he would now be violently choking on it. Good thing they had left off on the tea.

"How- how did you know?" Gilderoy exclaimed breathlessly, hands flying to his mouth in dramatic horror. Draco had expected Gilderoy to try and equivocate longer, but he supposed Gilderoy lacked the fortitude when it came to Draco.

"You were pretty obvious at Christmas this morning," Draco said, hardly likely to confess his spying, but just that did the trick for Gilderoy.

"Oh no! I suppose I was! Silly old me," Gilderoy fretted. "I just can't contain my affections sometimes... much as Severus is adamant that 'not another living soul must ever know.'"

"So the question remains," Draco cut in, "What exactly is going on between you and my godfather?"

Gilderoy squinted at him doubtfully. "I always forget exactly how old you are..."

"Seventeen," Draco said. "More than old and experienced enough to deal with whatever you throw at me."

Gilderoy turned pink, hands on his own cheeks, and with a little dramatic whisper as if they weren't alone, uttered the word, "Sex!" Draco had to stifle a hysterical giggle.

"Sex," Draco echoed. "Yeah, I figured. And what else?"

"Nothing," Gilderoy said, suspiciously levelly. "Just sex."

Draco didn't know if he'd been expecting anything different, but it still was not exactly nice to hear. "Sex and sex only," he said, and Gilderoy shrugged uncomfortably.

"That's what Severus wants," Gilderoy said sadly. "He says he still loves someone from his past, so he could never fall in love with me, and all he can give me is- is his body." Gilderoy winced at the last word and did a double take at Draco, but Draco just laughed.

"Don't worry, you haven't scarred me. It's just, I'm sure you wish there could be more to it."

"That's not up to me," said Gilderoy, but Draco doubted suddenly whether it was. Of all the times he'd seen Severus and Gilderoy together, there was a depth and breadth of feeling present that sure suggested more than mere fornication. Although yes, from what he'd seen today, base animal lust with it.

"Just don't sell yourself short," was all Draco advised him. "I think you have more of an influence on my godfather than you know."

"I hope that's true," Gilderoy said gloomily, before brightening up. "So you don't object to my involvement with your godfather, then? You approve of us? It would mean the world to me to have your blessing."

Draco resisted the urge to fondly roll his eyes. "You have my blessing."

Draco arrived at the observatory five minutes before midnight, having fobbed Harry off with a false story of visiting Luna. Millie was already there, pacing the floors with a heavy tread. "You came," she said, not looking over at him. "I wasn't sure if you would."

"Come on, Mills, you know you can always count on me!" Draco said jovially, but Millie's lack of reaction made the words fall very flat. Millie was in her Slytherin uniform, looking as normal as could be, and yet something about her demeanor sent shivers through Draco.

"Really?" she said caustically, lifting her head towards him at last. Draco could see from her reddened, swollen face that she had been crying, perhaps for some time. "Really, Draco

Black? I can really count on you?"

Her hollow tone troubled Draco more than he could say, but he thought it best to let her talk, keep quiet and let her get out whatever she had to get out. He immediately regretted that decision when she asked in the same tone, "Then why did you lie to me?"

Theo instantly came to Draco's mind, but he told himself it couldn't be that. "When have I ever lied to you, Millie?"

"When you told me," Millie said, slowly and deliberately, "That you knew nothing about what had happened to Theo."

So it was Theo, then. Draco took care not to let his face change. "I don't, Millie."

"Liar," Millie said, pointing a steady finger right at him. "Liar."

"Why would you say that?" Draco asked as logically as he could, trying hard not to flinch away from her or do anything to give himself away. It was alright, he had lied his way through this with her before...

"Wooky and Nissy," Millie said with a mirthless laugh. "You killed them, didn't you?"

And Draco was suddenly at sea. "Why would you..."

"Dobby came to me today," she said without mercy, "And told me you'd told him Wooky and Nissy were dead, but you wouldn't say how. He thought I might know something, about what could have happened to them, but I didn't tell him. I think you killed them, Draco Black. Wooky and Nissy, who Pansy had helping Theo. I think Theo went after you at Hogwarts, the day it fell, with Wooky and Nissy, and you fought them and killed them all."

Draco could hardly keep his face up for much longer. "How many times do I have to tell you, Millie, I don't know how Theo died-"

Millie slapped him, a solid backhand across the face that sent him stumbling across the floor of the observatory. His hand went in his pocket to touch his wand by reflex, and Millie cast Expelliarmus, where she was the picture of caution, levitating it cautiously to her pocket even as she trembled. Draco wasn't sure if she shook in rage or despair.

"Tell the truth! Tell the truth, for once in your miserable life! I've known it since we kidnapped Pansy and everyone, since we talked about it then, but I wasn't sure, not sure enough until I heard about the elves-"

"If I did it, what will you do?" Draco said, throwing up his arms and betraying the truth without thinking. He held his hands in the air to indicate himself solidly unarmed and noncombative, even as his face stung from her hand. "What's your end game here, Millie? Well? You have me, what do you plan to do with me? You can't lay another hand on me, and you know it."

Millie's face changed, crumpling it what seemed near to tears again. She still had her wand in hand. "Oh, Merlin, it was you... why did you do it, Draco, why did you kill Theo..."

"It- it was-" Draco took a deep breath, and spoke the truth to her broken face. "It was self-defense, alright? He sent a monster to try and kill me, I had no choice-"

"Self-defense," Millie echoed disbelievingly. "Like with Mr. Nott? Draco, why didn't you let him live once you beat him? Why couldn't you have shown him mercy?"

"He would never have stopped coming after me and the people I care about," Draco said helplessly, and she turned away from him, concealing her face. Draco's eyes dropped to the shape of the talon wand in her pocket, but he didn't make any movement towards her. He hoped this wouldn't have to end in violence, although that felt like an increasingly bleak hope.

Millie began to laugh, a harsh wracking sound like coughing that could not have found anything in the world less funny. "I chose the wrong side! I can't believe it, I chose the wrong side! All along, I shouldn't have been here. I should have been at Hogwarts, where at least they don't pretend to be good! How did I ever choose sides and choose wrong?"

Draco reached for Millie's back tentatively. "You don't mean that, Millie. There's Ginny to think of..."

Millie whirled around on him, wand stabbing right against his chest. "Don't you dare speak her name! You don't know a thing about it! You murderer! Theo was my friend, and I went with his murderer!"

Millie could kill him now if she wanted, but Draco knew in his heart that was something Millie simply didn't have in her. Whether she wanted to hurt him for how badly he'd just hurt her, that was the question. "You're right, Millie," Draco said carefully. "Maybe I should have shown him mercy. I'm sorry."

"Do you think that does anything now?" Millie shrieked, wand shaking where it lay right against his heart. "Do you think that does a thing to bring my friend back? Oh, you're sorry? As if that matters? Don't you dare say you're sorry-"

"Alright, I won't," Draco said, taking a careful step backwards, but she just followed him, keeping her wand jabbed right against him point-black. She had a face like she couldn't decide whether to cry or scream loud enough to bring the rafters down.

"He really is gone," Millie said, shoulders shaking, and Draco yearned to comfort her even as she menaced him emptily. "He's not coming back. He's gone forever..."

"I'm sorry," Draco said, despite her warning against it, and her face set hard against him.

"Crucio!" she cried.

There was a spark of heat against Draco's chest, but nothing else. The agonizing pain he expected, that he almost felt in the moment like he deserved, didn't come.

"You have to mean it for it to work," Draco said softly.

"Crucio!" she tried again, waving her wand imperiously, but nothing happened. Apparently she didn't really have it in her heart to torture Draco. "Damn it, why isn't it working? Crucio!"

Draco almost said I'm sorry again, as if to apologize for her inability to torture him. He thankfully made himself refrain from that particular piece of monstrosity. "Millie, you're not a torturer. You do belong on this side, you're *good*-"

"You don't know who I am," Millie seethed, a single tear running down her cheek. She hauled her fist back and punched him squarely in the left eye where she had slapped before, sending Draco sprawling to the ground in a heap. Pain exploded across his entire face and down his body, the blow stunning him as little else could have. Draco stared up at her, entirely at her mercy, expecting the kind of beating he had used to get from his father. A part of him welcomed it.

But she just tossed his wand down onto him contemptuously, then stalked away and out of the observatory, leaving him alone on the ground.

Draco fumbled, trying to stand up, and failed, so dizzy he found he was from the hit he'd taken. Millie could sure pack a punch, those fists that punched Quaffles out of her hoops. His left eye had swollen up instantly to blind him entirely on that side, making the world even more unsteady. He crawled forward towards the locked door, the impulse driving him to pull himself out of sight, where no one could know what he'd done.

"Dignusanguine," he gasped, and the door opened to the moonstone sanctum. Draco dragged himself to his feet and pulled himself inside, pushing the door shut behind him. The glow of all the moonstones was not slow in assaulting him, overwhelming his one good eye and sending him stumbling from sensory overload. He steadied himself and went in regardless, wanting to see the Mirror of Erised, to see Harry's loving face at least, to try and shake the feeling of the worthless monster he'd become.

Except there was already someone standing before the Mirror of Erised.

He was beautiful, there was no better word for it, draped in a loose burgundy silk sleeping robe, with moonstone-pale skin showing around it, graceful legs on display where he stood. His hands were clasped together before him, with his hair hanging in his face, unruly dark curls flowing down long over his back behind him as well as in front, in lush superabundance.

Shimmering reflections from the moonstones swam over his form, making him look underwater, plunged into a vacuum of silence. Even before the man tossed the hair away and revealed a heartbreakingly lovely pair of large dark eyes, though, and a face like a porcelain doll, Draco knew exactly who was there waiting for him.

"Dantanian?" Draco gasped, blinking his right eye rapidly to try and dispel the image of the apparition before him. It stayed there distinctly, and remained as Dantanian crossed the floor to stand right before him, tossing his hair back out of the way and offering him, of all things, a slight smile.

"You know me, little dragon," Dantanian said softly, in that voice that had called the moon down from the sky and turned a little boy into a Dementor. "I'm honored. Are you alright?"

"No, my eye," Draco said fuzzily, and Dantanian laughed musically, effortlessly charming as he was monstrous.

"I can see," Dantanian said soothingly. "Well, you have one eye to see with. That's enough."

"What is it I need to see?" Draco asked wonderingly. "Is it you? Is the Sword of Gryffindor here?"

"No," Dantanian said with another curl of his pretty lips, taking Draco by the shoulder to lead him along. His hands were silk-smooth and elegant, pulling him so effortlessly it was like the two of them were floating on air. "The mirrors."

Dantanian drew him to the Mirror of Erised, where he wrapped his arms around Draco and whispered in his ear as Draco stared at the image of Harry. Somehow, Draco had never felt more remote from the boy he loved than in that moment. "The mirrors, my little dragon, the mirrors. I have nothing to give you but the mirrors."

"You don't even have those," Draco said bitterly, turning away from Harry's face to regard Dantanian in all his splendor balefully. "You gave them away. They're scattered now."

"Indeed," Dantanian intoned, "I gave them away, to those I loved. But now... now they belong in the place I found them." He led Draco around to the other side of the triangular obelisk and eased the Mirror of Espilce out of Draco's pocket, sliding it into the small holder for it. The miniscule bit of reflectiveness caught Dantanian as he moved swimmingly away, leading Draco with him to finally the third side of the obelisk. It was the empty one, where the Mirror of Ecidyrue had once been.

"The Mirror of Ecidyrue," Dantanian breathed. "You know it well, my dragon. Is it not a pity, to have it missing?"

"What are you saying?" Draco asked, feeling a horror go through him the likes of which he had not felt in so long, a coldness for no reason that lingered in his bones.

"I am saying," Dantanian said with his charming half-smile, "Imagine if it was restored to its place. Imagine if we had all three mirrors. Imagine the things we could do with them. Just imagine."

Severus's Advice

Draco managed to slip into his and Harry's bed without waking Harry. But that did mean he had to deal with Harry waking up to find his beloved Draco had a black eye. "Oh my God, did someone hit you?" Harry gasped, and Draco shook his head, though the quick motion made his head dizzy.

"I fell, Harry," Draco said, and met the incredulity he supposed that excuse deserved.

"Into someone's fist?" said Harry, crossing his arms, and Draco tried to give him his best smile, despite knowing it might look grotesque with the state his face was in.

"No, really, I fell on the stairs down from Ravenclaw Tower last night. It was late and I was tired. Seriously, Harry, don't freak out."

"How can I when my dragon is hurt?" Harry wheedled, but Draco managed to shame him into not worrying so much. Which did involve submitting to being dragged to see Madam Pomfrey to fix his face. Harry would accept no less on that windy Boxing Day, which marked the end of the time they'd agreed to spend at Xaphan.

They went to Sirius and Remus's chambers for breakfast after, catered by a downcast Dobby, whose presence made Draco feel he still deserved the mark on his face and worse. Still, the amount Remus fussed over them made the other part of him glad his face looked normal again. And he did always like to look good for Harry.

He was tempted to tell his adopted parents about Severus and Gilderoy, just to see the gobsmacked look he sure that would put on both of their faces. But he couldn't do that to Severus and Gilderoy, and anyway, talk at the table that morning was of a more serious sort.

Draco listened to Harry tell Remus and Sirius about their run-in with Bellatrix Lestrange and co, and all the information they'd gleaned from it. He was rather busy wondering if he wasn't going mad, after his conversation with Dantanian in the sanctum. That divided his attention enough that Sirius had to ask him twice how the duel with Bellatrix had gone.

"Not good," Draco said glumly. "She cut me on the side really badly, I nearly passed out before we could escape them."

"How did they ever find you, anyway?" Remus marveled.

Draco shot Harry a surreptitious look, but it was unnecessary. "We still have no idea," Harry said earnestly, and they seemed to believe him.

Sirius offered to spar Draco in a duel, but Draco turned him down. He remembered losing to Sirius shortly before they departed Xaphan, and how that had dented his self-confidence. Who knew how much better Sirius must have gotten now, after teaching the subject every day. And anyway, the time was coming when they would have to say their goodbyes and leave Xaphan yet again.

There was only one hitch in the plan, though, and it wasn't Luna- well, not exactly. She planned to depart Xaphan and say goodbye in the same way her cousin had: by letter. She was leaving her father a lengthy missive in his rooms, which she had yet to deliver, when Xenophilius Lovegood came storming into Harry and Draco's rooms with his gaze bent on Luna. He barked her name with unusual ferocity, and then it came to Draco: he already knows.

"If you think Sirius and Remus wouldn't have warned me," Xenophilius began, incensed, all in a ramble, "You are sixteen, Luna, *sixteen*-"

"Why don't we give these two some privacy," Draco said quickly, and despite what he thought his favorable action, he earned a glare from Xenophilius that overflowed with striking spite. Maybe it came down to whom he placed the blame upon for Luna's prospective new adventure, and the logical target perhaps would be the one and only Draco Black.

The four of them went into the hallway, where they could still hear the sound of Xenophilius's raised voice, though not Luna's calmer dulcet tones. At least they were spared from making out what Luna's father was saying to her, although Draco could swear he distinctly heard his own name being brought up several times, as could have been predicted. Draco and the others were left awkwardly lingering outside pretending nothing was going on, though Hermione clasped Draco by the shoulder sympathetically at one point, as if able to sense that the lion's share of the animosity was directed towards Draco in this situation.

She happened to be right. Luna came out into the hallway, looking rather chastened, while her father poked his head out behind her and barked, "Draco Black!"

"Do you want me to come in, sir?" Draco asked as earnestly as he could, but just received a terse nod and a gesture beckoning him in before the doors shut between them and the others.

"Were you the one to invite her on this fool's mission of Dumbledore's, which you won't even explain to your elders?" was Xenophilius's opening salvo, and yeah, a lot there to unpack.

Draco decided to take a different tactic. "Sir, Luna is an accomplished witch-"

"Do you think I don't know that?" Xenophilius hissed. "Of course she is. I am very proud of my daughter. That does not mean she is ready for whatever hell you are poised to plunge her into! I was unhappy she was taking solo trips to L'Infern, let alone whatever this is! She is *sixteen*, Mr. Black, that is below the age of adulthood in our society, lest you forget. She is not a legal adult like the rest of you, and as her father, that does give me more say than your poor parents in where Luna is to go and what she is to do-"

"Sirius and Remus are proud of us for attempting this mission," Draco said, stung. "And Severus is behind us totally as well. It may not be pretty, sending us off to somewhere we can't tell you, but it's what's necessary to be done. Don't you care about the war?"

"Ah, yes, the war," Xenophilius seethed. "The war in which Sirius and Remus intend to involve all of their older students, in some fool's attempt to retake Hogwarts." Draco's mouth fell open. If that was true, it was news to him. "But not yet! They know the sixth-years like

Luna are not ready to engage in that kind of life-or-death combat! Can you deny you will be placing Luna in such situations by bringing her along with you?"

"Don't you think that's Luna's choice?" Draco said, less sure than he had been before this conversation. "She may be sixteen, but she's been through so much, more than so many adults. There was second year, with the diary, and then there's what happened with Neville-"

"Ah, yes," Xenophilius said, drawing himself up more dourly, and with more certainty. "We arrive at the topic of Neville Longbottom at last. Do you know, Mr. Black, this story my daughter gave of a Death Eater ambush that claimed him, I sorely doubt?" Draco tried to keep from gaping too openly at this salvo. It was difficult. "I believe *you* had already involved her and her friends in some desperate mission of yours, to do Merlin knows what, and Neville was the cost!"

Draco forced himself to be calm. "You have no proof of that."

Xenophilius took on a twisted smile. "That is not a denial, is it, Mr. Black? And you expect me to send off my daughter to the same fate, to be left behind by you and your friends in the clutches of-"

"We didn't leave Neville behind!" Draco cried out, and only after realized his mistake. Xenophilius looked unsurprised at Draco's inadvertent disclosure. Draco shut his mouth quickly after, not sure how he kept making this worse. He could have elaborated, but somehow he doubted blaming Neville's capture on Luna, Millie, and Ginny would raise Xenophilius's spirits.

"So," Xenophilius said in a low, deadly tone. "You lie, Mr. Black, you lie, I suspect, habitually and perhaps compulsively. Although you do not lie very well."

"I usually lie much better than this," Draco admitted, with a mighty pout. He did not receive any of Xenophilius's humor or sympathy for this disclosure.

"This is life and death for my daughter, and you expect me to entrust her to *you*?"

"*She* trusts me," Draco said as his last recourse, calling upon Luna's faith to justify himself. "She knows me, sir, and she trusts me completely still-"

"Ah, yes," Xenophilius said darkly. "She trusts you, you say. Of course she does. She idolizes you. Virtually worships you. She wishes to be just like you, for better or for worse. And you take advantage of that adulation, to ask her to accompany you beneath the shadow of death."

Draco thought quickly. "That's what she must have said to you, isn't it, that she wants to go because she wants to help me? And you want to discredit me, to justify making her stay behind. Well, I'm sorry, Mr. Lovegood, but nothing is ever going to part me and Luna. And I think you must be somewhat ready to let her take her own path, or you and *I* wouldn't be having this conversation right now."

"She knows not what she does," Xenophilius sighed, but didn't deny it. "My precocious little girl."

The five of them departed Xaphan on that chilly Boxing Day afternoon, with some of the others come to watch them go and bid them good fortune. Arthur and Molly Weasley were there, surprisingly not trying to plead with Ron to stay back, but rather embracing him fiercely, especially in the case of his mother, and pleading with him to be careful. Xenophilius was wailing over Luna, but not trying to make her stay anymore. Hermione stood alone, rather awkwardly, before Ginny started forward to make much of her, while Sirius and Remus fussed over Harry, and Draco stepped up to where Severus loomed in the corner.

"So," Draco said lightly. "Any advice?" He would take whatever advice he got, he found, more solemnly than Severus might know. His verbal altercation with Xenophilius had taxed some of his faith in himself.

"Only this," Severus said in a low voice, so only Draco could hear. "Do not let overconfidence be your downfall."

"What?" Draco laughed, singsong and chipper at this unexpected bit of what sounded to be levity to him. "Do I seem liable to do that?"

Severus just met him with a stony glare until Draco made one of his hug assault attempts on his godfather, and got mere seconds of an embrace before he was shoved away menacingly. Good enough.

The Portkey deposited them at L'Infern, their new base for the time being. They had discussed it, and found it had many advantages compared to camping in the countryside, where they had already been happened upon, albeit by fellow fugitives in the person of the goblins. Gilderoy wouldn't be returning to L'Infern without lessons there to give Luna, so the place was theirs, and hardly frequented otherwise. It had wards up to defend against incursions, it had the Estany de L'Infern with its fearsome reputation to further deter visitors- they were all on strict orders to avoid the lake themselves- and it was in Spain, so distant from the usual battlegrounds that it might baffle the Death Eaters, however publicized the place had been when the authorities found Gilderoy. Yes, the Castell de L'Infern, with its ever-blooming garden and its heat-insulated rooms, was their comparatively lavish new home. Even though they still intended to give Sirius and Remus their check-up calls from within the tent, to keep anyone in the Order from finding out where they had established themselves for their hunt.

That hunt was rather on life support, after none of them had seen any luck looking for the Sword of Gryffindor at Xaphan. Luna suggested they focus on the next Horcrux itself, but without any way to destroy the one they had or the prospective one they'd find, they all knew it was a fool's errand. So their attention focused on finding the Sword of Gryffindor, or at least some way to destroy a Horcrux.

They killed some time the first few days reviewing over all the materials they had with Luna, showing her the books and relevant passages and letting her speculate like the rest of them

had about where this puzzle was leading. She took in the suggestion that Dumbledore might have left the Sword of Gryffindor somewhere important to Draco, and asked obviously, "What about Malfoy Manor?"

"No, we already discussed that, it's a non-starter," said Ron, although Draco was definitely more quiet about the idea than the first go-around.

What was happening in his mind was crystallizing slowly, steadily as the flakes of snow formed together in the sky before dreamily floating down upon them. He had the aftertaste of his vision of Dantanian in the moonstone sanctum with him always, Dantanian's words about what they- *they*!- could do with three mirrors echoing in his ears. He kept telling himself he would tell the others about his vision, and kept pushing the thought away, although it was hard to completely, except from when he was with Harry, spread out above or underneath him, having every thought pushed out of his head save the boy he loved.

One day, at least, they were distracted by a proposal of Luna's, who'd just finished rewatching the vial of Dantanian's memories one day, and asked, "What about Dantanian Noir?" Draco's heart immediately shot into his chest, as if she'd seen into his mind and seen things about Dantanian he wasn't telling them, but she meant it otherwise. "What about the places that were important to Dantanian Noir?"

"Dumbledore never knew about Dantanian," Hermione said, but she admitted that they couldn't be sure. Severus could have told Dumbledore anything he wanted at any time, and there was no given Dumbledore would have given away his new knowledge. And the wily old man must have had ways of finding out things himself, finding out secrets of Draco's in order to bestow the most weighty secret of his own, the sword.

So they took up an expedition at the end of the year, to trace the steps of Dantanian Noir, and see if they couldn't dig up anything about the Sword of Gryffindor there for Draco. Just a hint, some phantom of a sign, would have been good enough at this point to make Draco fall to his knees in gratefulness. The only alternative to the Sword of Gryffindor was one he didn't want to be considering.

They began at the beginning, trying to find Astarte Noir's little Montmartre apartment in the mass of people and life that was Paris; that was, if it even still remained, as was in question like the orphanage of Tom Riddle. The memories were hardly much help in isolating an exact location, so by the fourth day foffing about in Paris, Hermione called them all together very sternly and said she was sure they were wasting their time. "Dumbledore wouldn't have wasted time hunting down the exact place," she said firmly, "Or expected us to be able to. If it is in the trail of Dantanian Noir, it's somewhere further along in his life."

Hogwarts was the next natural step, as another place important to Dantanian, but they still had no way of accessing it, the place they needed most to go: for the possibility of the Sword of Gryffindor, the last Horcrux, and of course Neville, though no one mentioned him for Luna's sake. While Luna's face went pale and her body stiff while they talked of Hogwarts, she was valiant enough not to mention Neville either.

Azkaban was a similar non-starter, though they did seriously consider it for some time before deciding it was impossible. It ached at Draco's mind, the thought of the Sword of Gryffindor

left in the cell of Neil Palmer, the assassin of Dantanian's mother. But a jail cell at the new Dementor-less Azkaban would be firmly in the hands of the Dark Lord, and hardly an optimal place to entrust the future of the wizarding world.

What seemed marginally more possible was Dantanian's secret stash of moonstones. The difficulty there was that they had already been there, albeit not for looking for the sword, but simply a place to hide. And unfortunately, they'd been followed there by Bellatrix Lestrange and her Death Eaters, which made it one place known to the enemy. Going back there would be risking being found, either by chance if the Death Eaters still checked there for them, or if they had left some alert device unknown to Draco there for visitors. But ultimately, without any other leads save gallivanting off to Australia, they elected to follow the path back to the moonstone sanctum of Dantanian's own.

The cliffs that had been so sweeping and white before were now white with snow, the stuff sliding underfoot wherever they walked. Hermione called out extra caution to be taken with traversing the landscape, though Luna naturally ignored her and raced off to the very edge of the bluffs to see the ocean below. "Luna!" they all bellowed, so loudly that anyone around would have heard them, but anyone around without good intentions would have seen them Apparate in regardless.

A sheepish Luna followed them towards the secret entrance at the intercutting cliffs, where Draco led with the talon wand held high, ready at any moment to be ambushed, as well as needing to let them in. But no ambush materialized, despite Draco's heart remaining at a breakneck pace since the moment they'd arrived there, remembering how they'd been completely exposed along the cliffs last time to the blasts of the Death Eaters. He managed to compose himself enough to poke his wand up against the hole and recite Olympia Par Manet- no mysterious voice needed to remind him of the password this time- and wait for the entrance to open for them.

Open it did, prompting a squeal from Luna at the sight of all of the moonstones inside, which the filtered light coming through the entrance lit up like Xaphan at Christmas. "Ooh!" she went, and catapulted herself in. She seemed heedless of the danger the others saw in the place, not having suffered the battle with the Death Eaters that the others had here, but Draco was not about to let her go in first anywhere. He didn't know where someone could be waiting for them. He dragged a once-again sheepish Luna out of the entrance and went in first himself.

They found nothing. No one appeared in the radius, or arrived to torture and kill them, but they found nothing, save the horde of moonstones there and the broken cracked ones at the center that testified to the destruction attempt with Liquid Fiendfyre. At least Luna got to see how her vial had ended up being used, which she found fascinating despite its failure. That was the only highlight of the trip, aside from Draco taking the opportunity to fill up his bag with the millunas. You never knew when they would come in handy for some dark ritual or another.

They arrived back at L'Infern by Portkey tired from their constant terrified vigilance at the stash point, all the energy expended by remaining tense in case of attack. Four of them sank to the ground in the snow, defeated, while Hermione set at the unending supply of produce

and legumes and nuts from the garden to prepare them a meal. Since she'd found an untouched spice cache in one of the lower floors of L'Infern, the dinners were delicious, but it didn't help Draco's mood.

They were messing around aimlessly, as they had been for some time after the Sword of Gryffindor, when all the while the way forward should have been obvious to Draco. It should have been even before Dantanian came to him to open his half-closed eyes.

After stuffing themselves full, they began their nightly talk around the fire roasting hazelnuts, much to Luna's glee. She seemed as fond of the things as only Seguinus Sade could have rivaled, lighting up every time they entered the picture. Luna was espousing upon the virtues of hazelnuts when Draco cut in without warning, speaking having been zoned out for minutes thinking and now letting his thoughts come to the surface at last.

"Malfoy Manor," Draco said heavily. "It's Malfoy Manor. That's where we have to go. We're wasting our time going anywhere else."

And a voice in Draco's head which he now recognized as Dantanian added, for only his ears, *If you want the Mirror of Ecidyrue, little dragon, you must go alone.*

Hermione and Ron exchanged a quick doubtful glance that didn't escape Draco's attention, while Luna pouted at the interruption, and Harry leaned forward with all his earnestness on his face. "I thought you didn't want to go there, Draco."

"We have to, though," Draco said with utter certainty, "And I've just been being a coward."

Another glance between Ron and Hermione, shared with Harry this time. "You really think Dumbledore left the Sword of Gryffindor at Malfoy Manor?" Ron asked, skepticism in his voice clear, because he didn't know anything, not yet.

"He might have left the Sword of Gryffindor on the moon for all the luck we're having finding it," Draco sighed, rubbing at his eyes. Luna offered him a piece of hazelnut from her cracked-open shell, and Draco let her toss it into his mouth, interrupting the seriousness of his pitch with a spot of warmth. "He might have, you have to all admit it. We've been wandering without any real clue looking for it and putting ourselves in harm's way every time. The Sword of Gryffindor might as well be lost to us."

"So... you don't think it's at Malfoy Manor," Ron said slowly. "But we still need to go there?"

"Yes," Draco said, turning away from his cousin to stare in the fire. The others jumped as it flared from Draco's mind focusing on it, lifting higher towards the sky full of crystalline-clear stars. "Yes, I do."

"Stop being mysterious and tell us!" Luna exclaimed. "Are we going to kill Aunt Bella? Is that why?"

"She'll be there," Draco said with a groan, "And maybe we will have to face her, but we can't avoid that. We have to go to Malfoy Manor because of the mirrors."

Hermione's face lit up with understanding. "The three mirrors. The Daughters' Mirrors," she said thoughtfully. "You still want to find them all, don't you, Draco?"

"I do," said Draco, "Because I think that with all three of them, if I become the master of the mirrors, I might be able to destroy the Horcrux."

Luna pulled the Horcrux out from under her shirt confusedly, staring at its smooth contours reflecting the firelight with obvious doubt. "How? What would you do to destroy it then?"

"I don't know," Draco said honestly, "But I think I'd have the power to then. And it's our only way now to get hold of a lot more power. And that's what we need, power. Maybe once we have more power, the rest of what we need will come."

"The Mirror of Ecidyrue," said Harry, and just the sound of those words from that cherished mouth sent shivers through Draco that made him huddle closer to the magically-expanded fire. "You want to go to Malfoy Manor to find that. And to take it back with you. You want to steal it from Bellatrix Lestrange."

It sounded mad when Harry put it that way, but Draco suddenly knew better. "No," Draco said, "She can't access it, remember? It only appears to a worthy member of the Malfoy family. So she won't have it in her possession. We'll have to go to the cellars, where Dorian Malfoy hid it, and hope it presents itself to me as worthy. And I'm worthy for House Black, the moonstone sanctum opens to me, so I can't see why I wouldn't be worthy of the Malfoy family mirror."

"This is insane," Hermione said, clutching at Ron's shoulder to steady herself. "You *think* it might appear. And all the while we'd be fending off Bellatrix, and the Lestranges, and oh, Draco, your *parents*..."

"We could go in the middle of the night," Draco offered, "Sneak in, and hopefully we'd never have to see them," even as he knew himself to be weaving fairytales.

Silence reigned for some time after this ridiculous proposition of Draco's. "You really want to do this, don't you, dragon," Harry finally said quietly.

"So bad I'll face them if that's what it takes," Draco said tightly. "I need that mirror. I'll face Aunt Bella for it. I'll face my father. I'll face my mother. I'll kill them if that's what it takes to get my hands on the Mirror of Ecidyrue." He almost said *get my hands on it again.* "And frankly, killing Aunt Bella would be a bonus one way or another, so..."

Draco was just damned glad none of them had overheard Severus's advice to him as they left: *Don't overestimate yourself.*

They began plotting out an attack plan on Malfoy Manor, with the others giving in as much because they were out of ideas as anything else. Draco could provide from memory large areas of Malfoy Manor for Hermione to map out. She used those maps to begin figuring out an optimal path into Malfoy Manor, one the least likely to disturb the residents as well: they

were holding on to Draco's jawdroppingly inane plan of trying to sneak in during the middle of the night and avoid their enemies. Hermione wanted to find the best way to do that, as if it was realistically possible.

They hit a snag only on New Year's Eve, which Luna had insisted they celebrate with some form of festivities. She had always been one for holidays, since Draco had known her, and made Harry count out the minutes and seconds down to midnight for them. They stayed up until fireworks should have been exploding around them, except they were so far from civilization there was nothing, just the open and terrifyingly starry black-blue sky. "Happy New Year," Draco said to Harry, planting a firm kiss to his lips at midnight. Ron did the same to a blushing Hermione.

Luna considered, then kissed the back of her palm quite vigorously. "Happy New Year, Neville," she said after, and no one dared comment upon that.

The trouble only came when Draco let slip the true depths of his thoughts to them. Hermione brought up the mission to Malfoy Manor soon after midnight, reflecting that they had almost completely prepared to embark upon it before too long, and Draco made the mistake of uttering the words, "Well, you don't have to."

"Draco!" Hermione exclaimed, hands going to her hips. "You're the one who's been so set on this mission from the beginning!"

"No, I mean *you* don't have to," Draco said, already somewhat uncomfortable as he anticipated the reaction to his idea. "I could just go by myself."

The reaction did not disappoint. "What are you talking about?" Harry erupted, and Ron and Luna came forward too looking irritated. "What do you mean, go by yourself?"

"I mean I could just go to Malfoy Manor and take the mirror myself," Draco said, furtively meaning the words, because he didn't know if he wanted the others around the Mirror of Ecidyrue when he first faced it again. "This is my idea, and my plan. I can accomplish it myself."

"The hell you can!" Ron exclaimed, looking like he wanted to slug Draco for his temerity. "You're not going back there alone, Draco. End of story."

"But really, given that we can do it without waking the enemy, doesn't it make more sense for me to just-"

"NO!" four voices chorused at him in unison.

"If you want to do everything by yourself, Draco," Luna asked logically, but with a trembling voice, "Then why did you ask me to come along on your mission in the first place?"

Draco couldn't have them there, though. Not in front of the Mirror of Ecidyrue. Not with what it might betray. He just couldn't. "I don't know, Luna," was all he said, and soon the others joined in barraging him with censure for how stupid his go-it-alone plan had been. They seemed intent on beating any thought out of his head of even attempting such stupidity.

Harry took up the mantle for the others tenfold once they had all parted for bed that night. Secured inside Karkaroff's old chambers where the two of them always slept now, Harry turned to Draco with them in their pajamas and growled, "You're not going alone, and that's that. Understood?"

"Okay, Harry, you're right."

"I mean, what were you even thinking, saying that?" Harry exploded, looking personally affronted. At least angry was a strikingly good look on him, there in the floating bluebell flames that illuminated the room.

"You know I'll always be by your side, Draco. You have to know that. Whether you want me to be or not, I'll be there for you. Forever. And ever. Do you understand me?"

"I'm sorry, Harry. I understand that. Until the end of the war," Draco said, and Harry seized Draco in his arms, pulling him onto the bed in front of him. Okay, this was looking up.

Except not if Harry was just putting him there to berate him more thoroughly. "You're mine, Draco," Harry said firmly, as if he wanted to try and carve the words into Draco's skin. "Mine, and you're not leaving me. Ever. Are you?"

"No," Draco lied, heart twinging, and tried to pull Harry down onto him, or at least on the bed with him. "I said I'm sorry and I won't mention it again, alright? So can we please just..."

"What," Harry said fiercely, "You're just going to use sex to try and make things better like you always do," which, okay, harsh but fair...

"No," Draco said softly, "I just want to feel you, dragonslayer, is that so much to ask?"

Draco knew he had Harry when those burning green eyes dropped to run over Draco, a quick, furtive examination he probably didn't realize he was doing himself. "Alright," Harry said, and sat on the bed next to him. He let Draco lean against him, plastering his face to the side of Harry's, and reached out with his free hand and began to stroke Draco's hair. They sat that way for some time, and maybe it gave Harry the illusion Draco really was truly his. Draco could hardly begrudge Harry that.

Finally, Harry's fingers ceased and he leaned back, stretching with his arms over his head in a silent yawn. "We should be getting to sleep, shouldn't we," he said, sounding contented, but Draco was far from content.

"Is that what you want?" Draco complained. "To sleep?"

"Aren't you tired?" Harry asked, and Draco shook his head, tossing his hair aside to deliberately display his slender pale throat.

"Do I look tired to you," Draco said, and then slowly where he sat began to undo the buttons on his Ravenclaw-blue pajama shirt.

"What are you doing?" Harry said with an obliviousness that strained credulity. It was them. What did Harry think he was doing?

"I'm hot," Draco said nonchalantly. "Maybe I should sleep like this."

Harry's eyes followed the motion of Draco's fingers as they unbuttoned. "I guess I shouldn't cuddle you then, I'll just get you more overheated..." It sounded as though he'd been looking forward to it.

"No," Draco said, "I want you to get me hot," and even Harry couldn't fail to catch the meaning of that.

"Seriously?" Harry said, though a flush hit his cheeks. "I'm still cross at you."

"That- talk before, it was just a suggestion. Forget about it." Draco shrugged his pajama top off. Harry might have been worked up against him still, but he certainly didn't seem able to control what his eyes did around Draco, any more than he ever had.

"You're mine, you know," Harry said in the same antagonistic tone as before, but he seemed hypnotized by the skin on show before him now. His brilliant green eyes behind their glasses had fastened on Draco like they naturally wanted to touch.

Draco coiled up to whisper in his ear, "Then why don't you show me?"

Harry looked unsure despite Draco's best efforts. "How do you want me to show you, dragon?"

Draco's lips drew across Harry's earlobe as he breathed, "I want you to take it out on me. All your frustration. I want you to show me how angry I made you."

Harry was hard- predictably so, but that didn't keep the sight from sending a rush of giddy triumph through him like it always did. Draco dropped his gaze to the shape straining under red silk, and the slowly licked his lips.

Harry sat up and pushed Draco on his back on the sumptuous jade bed, breathing a little hard. "Why do you always have to drive me so crazy?"

Draco truthfully had no idea why the heavens had chosen to bestow upon him this power over Harry. But he certainly wasn't complaining."Because you love me," Draco said throatily, and Harry shut his eyes hard.

"Yes," he said, "Yes I do, too much," and when he opened his eyes, they had a new determination in them that made Draco's pulse thrum. "Take off everything else."

Draco obeyed quickly, and Harry took off his own pajama shirt, but when Draco reached eagerly to get Harry naked too, Harry stopped his hands. "Just do as you're told, dragon," Harry said intently, and arousal thrummed through Draco so severely, he almost feared he would come too soon, before Harry wanted him to.

"Lie on your stomach," Harry ordered, and Draco did, earning a slap to one of the tender cheeks of his ass. Draco whimpered in surprise, head turning towards Harry, and Harry took Draco's face and kissed him, hot wet lingering pecks at first that turned to more.

Harry hadn't held back with that slap. Draco wondered if he would have Harry's handprint on his skin there. He found he rather hoped so.

Harry got his wand and cast the necessary spells, then gave Draco another solid kiss. "You want my fingers?" he whispered.

"No," Draco moaned, "I'm ready, don't make me wait, want your cock..." He heard Harry take a breath in sharply, as if still unused to how desperate Draco could get when worked up this much. But Harry was not slow in obliging.

"Ah," Draco exhaled as Harry bottomed out inside him, feeling he could finally breathe now that he had what he needed inside him. "Slow at first, Harry. Just let me feel you."

"Alright," Harry agreed, sounding almost sweet in his agreement, despite the agony Draco must be putting him through making him go slow. But slow he went, long, smooth pushes into Draco that felt downright romantic, with Harry's face buried in the back of his neck and his hair.

"Yes, that's it, you're so good," Draco moaned, pressing back up into Harry's thrusts. "Love you, Harry..."

"I love you too," Harry whispered, rocking his hips steadily. "Please, dragon, can I- can I go a little faster?"

"You can do whatever you want to me," Draco said dreamily, high on that sense of surrender, and Harry began to speed up, building momentum until the air echoed with wet noises when their bodies came together, and Draco began to feel that telltale pleasure-pain that meant he really had gotten Harry into it.

Neither of them lasted long at a pace that turned breakneck. Soon, they were coiled up together, and they had fallen asleep.

Well, *Harry* had fallen asleep.

Draco climbed out of bed without waking Harry, his first hurdle to making it out without detection. He took his clothes from his bag as quietly as he could and went to another chamber to change into them quickly, all black with a hooded black robe that shielded against the cold. Then he took every footstep like a ghost, remembering the way Dantanian had moved in his vision. Hermione still had the map they'd made of Malfoy Manor, but that was alright. Draco knew where to go. This place had used to be his home.

When he snuck out into the courtyard, he stood there for a long moment breathing in the frosty night air and watching his breath appear, thinking, *This is insane. I'm making a mistake.*

And sure as anything, he heard the words whispered in his ear, *Don't worry, little dragon. I'll be with you.* At least he couldn't feel the smooth lips delivering them against his earlobe this

time.

To think that when he had first seen the memories, he had been desperate to talk to Dantanian.

"Where are you going?" asked a louder voice, sweet and honest, and Draco had to cover his own mouth to suppress the shock that forced out of him then.

"Luna?" he hissed. "What are you doing up so late?"

"I couldn't sleep," she said, and Draco wondered with a pang if she'd been thinking of Neville. It was almost unbearable, the thought he could die at Malfoy Manor and leave her alone to face the task of getting Neville back. But he felt he had no choice, and didn't know why.

"Well," Draco said, hedging, "You caught me. I suppose you're going to wake up everyone else and expose me now?"

"Why?" Luna said, blinking up at him the perfect picture of innocence. "Where are you going?"

"You know," Draco said tightly. "Come on, Luna, you know."

"You're going to Malfoy Manor," Luna said softly, "Without me."

Draco was a hair's breadth from giving up the entire solo enterprise then, but something held him back. "I have to do this. I'm sorry."

"Why?" Luna said bluntly, getting up from the ground and coming up to face him. Draco wondered if she really was considering rousing the others now.

"Because Dantanian told me to," Draco blurted, and there it was laid out for her. He was going insane just like his Aunt Bella, to his more immediate doom.

Luna eyed him thoughtfully, taking no rash action. "You've been hearing his voice, have you?" Draco nodded. "You must take care, cousin. When I first began to hear Tom Riddle's voice, I thought it harmless. Sweet."

"This isn't like that," Draco said emphatically, and Luna shrank back a bit. "No, I'm sorry, Luna, I'm not mad at you, I swear, I just know I can't turn back now. I'm going to get that mirror. I'll be back before you wake up." Luna just stared at him assessingly, so Draco plunged forward. "You're not going to tell on me, are you?" he said wonderingly, reflecting that there seemed endless depths to Luna's loyalty. "Just think," he said more lightly, "Maybe I'll find a picture of Tom Riddle hidden somewhere I can bring back to you."

She rushed forward and hugged him around the middle. "Oh, Draco, do be careful," she said again, almost sniffling against his side. "I'll never forgive myself if you don't come back."

"I promise," Draco said with certainty in his voice, if not his heart, "That I'll be back," and when he made his Portkey, she pulled away from him to let him go as he spun away to

Malfoy Manor.

Malfoy Manor

Draco arrived outside the walls of Malfoy Manor on a shadowed night, talon wand lit in hand held up against the darkness that was so overwhelming around him. He Apparated just outside the wards, to a side entrance through the walls, knowing the wards would keep him out unless he took them down for himself first in person. He had to put out his wand and plunge once more into darkness once he reached the door he'd been looking for.

He cast Diffindo on the palm of the other hand and held it up too, smearing the blood over the front of the door and the knob. "Sanguirenere," Draco whispered, feeling the blood magic course through him. When he tried the door, it swung open with nothing and no one there to stop him.

The side entrance led to a path through the back gardens, which Draco followed to the letter, fearful of rousing the house by waking one of their albino peacocks and setting the thing squawking its head off. Not to mention, those things could attack. The first time Theo ever came to Malfoy Manor, one of the peacocks had gotten him.

With every step Draco took, his mind alternated between telling him, *You're insane for coming here alone*, and then reminding him, *This is how it has to be done.* Draco wasn't running, but he could hear his heartbeat in his ears, knowing he would soon be under the same roof as his Aunt Bella. *Don't let overconfidence be your downfall*, Severus had said, but Draco had no confidence at all when it came to facing Bellatrix Lestrange. All he could think was to somehow avoid rousing her if he wanted to keep his promise to Luna and get back out of Malfoy Manor alive.

Having managed to avoid the most ridiculous of his obstacles, the peacocks, he came to the side door. He used Alohomora and was surprised to find it worked. Perhaps his parents were relying on the safety of the wards to protect them. Funny that there was still a part of Draco indignant from that, which wanted his mother protected properly.

The side door opened into a corridor just outside the ballroom. Draco began to cross the room with quick, economical steps, but that didn't keep his mind from going back to Heart of Winter galas past, in both the red line and the blue loop. He remembered traversing this floor dancing with Luna, with Millie, with Pansy, listening to the convent coven's eerie wailing strings. He remembered trying and failing in third year to get Theo to dance with him. And he remembered the most, of course, standing up on that stage every year giving the fatal blessing he mouthed along sardonically as he passed: *May your magic, your blood, and your loves be as pure as these snows.*

He got out of the ballroom into a lengthy corridor that traversed many rooms, including his mother's tea room and the cozy study where Aunt Bella had used to teach him Occlumency. He was afraid of following this hall, which without many twists and turns left him open to attack, but it really was the most direct way to the cellars.

When he inched past the study, he could hear voices inside.

He couldn't hear what she was saying, but he would have known Bellatrix's voice anywhere. He couldn't help but press his ear to the door, trying to discern her purpose and if she would be leaving the room soon, but when he did, he kept hearing only one voice. Bellatrix was up at this late, late hour, pacing the floors talking to herself.

"...has to forgive me sometime, or I will surely perish," he clearly heard her say. "Oh, Tom..."

Maybe it actually sounded fair odds Draco could find a picture of Tom Riddle for Luna in there. But he wasn't exactly planning to check.

He began to tiptoe away from the door, thinking Bellatrix could be at that for some time, when abruptly her prattle ceased and she called out, "Is someone there?"

Draco's heart went to his throat, blood freezing. He ducked into a nearby alcove out of sight, so scared he nearly bit his tongue through trying to stay quiet. In a moment, Bellatrix carelessly opened the door and called out, "Cissy? Is that you?"

No response, of course, was forthcoming. Draco expected, or at least prayed for Bellatrix to leave the matter there. But instead, she called "Homenum revelio," and Draco's hidden form was instantly apparent to her.

Everything seemed to happen then and at once. At the same time Draco darted out into the hallway and ran forward- perhaps foolhardy to expose himself, but he was desperate to reach the cellars before she reached him- she cast Stupefy and he whirled just in time to cast Protego and hold back that burst of red light, and Bellatrix was shrieking, voice magically amplified, "Intruder! Intruder!"

So she hadn't seen his face yet. She would have had far choicer words then.

Bellatrix was wearing her long navy nightdress, feet barefoot on the carpets. It didn't make her an ounce less intimidating.

Run and try to block, run and try to block, that was what Draco did, and yet she was gaining on him with those bare feet, so much that it seemed certain she would corner him point-blank before he ever reached the door to the cellars. Except Draco was the one to gain on her then one time, when he whirled to cast Protego yet again, and his hood fell. A wave of Bellatrix's wand and all of the troches in the corridor were burning, and then she could see him clearly. She wouldn't even have to make out his face. Just the bright flash of his shoulder-length light hair was telltale enough.

"Draco!" she howled viciously, "Come, Cissy, it's your blood traitor son!" and Draco just ran while she yelled. He could see the entrance finally before him to the cellars where his destiny awaited him, Dantanian had promised-

Then his steps were arrested by a very familiar Impedimenta. Father and Mother appeared at the end of the hallway, both dressed for bed in black, Mother barefoot, Father with his slippers on. They had Draco pinned in on either side, and Draco's parents were in his way.

His mother was bearing a heavy burden at her stomach. It was an unmistakable one. Mother was pregnant.

Instinct made Draco fling himself to the ground a split second before red light exploded at him from both directions, and then his assailants were left trying to avoid and block each other's spells. Draco rolled and ran again towards his parents, keeping low, until he plowed into them. He sent Mother falling over sprawling, but Father picked himself up and raised his wand.

Draco ducked behind Mother's felled frame and cast Cauterizo to make Father lose his wand. The spell hit Father dead-on, but it did nothing, because there was no talon brand left there to enflame, Draco had seen to that himself in the Department of Mysteries. He cursed himself for having wasted his window of opportunity, and Father was trying to angle around Mother to shoot more red light at him, while from behind him flew a very familiar dagger-

The only option left to him was blind flight. He flung himself down again, so the spell and the blade only caught his sleeve, and only slightly. The talon wand bounced back into his hand as it clanged against the cellar doors where Draco threw himself, ready to descend at last-

Except the door was still locked, so Draco just bounced off it winded, and Merlin, he was losing his mind, making unforced mistake after mistake, and the Lestrange brothers must be seconds away...

"Protego Horribilis!" Draco screamed as curses flew his way from all sides, "Bombarda!" and the cellar door was blasted off its hinges. Draco had already been leaning forward, and he lost his footing, tumbling down the hard stone stairs in one flaring blast. He landed on the cellar floor, talon wand knocked out of his hand by the impact, and Rodolphus Lestrange got to him first, smirking triumphantly at seeing him unarmed.

Bellatrix's spell had lit all the torches in the cellar as well, so Draco could see the foul leer on that loathsome face clear as day in the firelight.

"My, my, now," Rodolphus gloated, holding him at wandpoint as he hauled him up from the floor, with Draco in that moment fully at his mercy. "What a lovely gift for the Dark Lord..."

He reached out to touch Draco's hair, and Draco didn't even have to think before he turned his head and bit him, teeth striking into Rodolphus's hand so hard he yowled and let go of Draco. Rodolphus's shriek then of Aruspices Mitte only missed Draco by a hair as he lunged for the talon wand, casting Serpensmorta and catching Rodolphus fully, and footsteps were pounding down the stairs...

Bellatrix had to waste time casting Vipera relashio on her ugly failure of a husband once she came down, while the others came to a stop at her back, waiting for her direction. Luckily for Draco, the one and only thing he did have going for him was that none of family seemed to be aiming to kill. They wanted to bring him back to the Dark Lord to redeem themselves. And there was his speed over them. And the fact that the cellars were full of nooks and crannies to turn and duck behind.

Draco rounded the corner and sprinted deeper into the cellars, trying to extend his lead. He wasn't sure where he was going or why, deeper into the bowels of Malfoy Manor where it seemed impossible he would ever escape. He ran nonetheless, young legs burning, until Bellatrix exploded the path behind him with a Confringo that nearly decimated him, screaming his name out all the while as she caught onto his trail again. Rabastan was there at her side now too, to replace his felled brother.

The only defense was chaos, as Draco kept riding and riding his luck. He cast Ventus tria, potentially deadly in such a small space. The tornado whipped around and threw itself in the faces of his enemies. Until Bellatrix somehow used just a wave of her wand to make it disappear, and then he had to face Bellatrix, face all of them...

Except he didn't. Draco cast Baubillious on the ceiling and made the cellar roof cave in between them. Unfortunately, he didn't seem to catch any of their heads beneath it. The debris was thrown aside with a Depulso just seconds after, but that got Draco running again, using his pyromancy as he went now to put out the lights in every chamber he entered. It didn't seem to dodge any of them from his wake.

He really was counting on luck and nothing else to preserve him, as he went pell-mell towards nowhere. He didn't know how deep the cellars went, but he noticed as he passed the jail cells with a shudder, seeing where they would likely put him unless they had any extra special intentions for him before they turned him over to the Dark Lord... it didn't bear thinking of, he wouldn't get caught, Dantanian had promised. He had to keep going and give it his all, scorched from inside out as his lungs felt, because Dantanian had sent him here for a reason, and he was damned if he was going to let that slip through his fingers before the end.

Draco finally arrived in a wider chamber where he decided to make his stand. "Protego Diabolica!" he hissed, and made blue flame come out of his wand, beginning to make a barrier between himself and the onrushing Death Eaters. Rabastan tried to dodge past it to make towards him, so Draco made the flame burst out at him and drive him back in fear. Bellatrix led the others unleashing curses upon him, but the blue fire held them back from him.

With what felt like agonizing slowness, Draco spun on his heel and finished drawing the circle of blue around himself, which he had used to preserve all his friends from these people. Now it was just him alone inside the flares of iciness that reminded him of Grindelwald. He knew his fearful and hasty construction had nothing on the magisterial, conductor-like musical beauty of Grindelwald's structure at Nurmengard, but he mentally prayed to his memory of Grindelwald that he be good enough to keep his enemies back off him. Voldemort had been able to snap his Protego Diabolica in two at the Ministry, yes, but there was no way Voldemort could come here because of the Naufragiam, so maybe, just maybe, for that second, he was safe...

Draco's hands dropped to his knees as he gasped for breath like water for a man dying of thirst, and he heard high-pitched laughter as the response. "Exhausted, are you, my pet?" Bellatrix shrieked. "Your pretty flames won't hold long, will they? We just need to wait until

he tires, and then he'll be all ours! You can look forward to it, blood traitor cunt! Look forward to what we will do to you once we have our claws in you!"

Draco couldn't make her out over the flame barrier, but just her voice was enough to make him shake. It sounded like she had dared to step up close to the wall of blue, if not of course into it, to deliver her taunt. Maybe all of them were prowling around the circle waiting for it to crumble- that was, if Rodolphus had recovered yet- all of them including his pregnant mother even, wands at the ready, hunters with their prey cornered ready to take it down.

"That's right, you won't last long, blood traitor!" Rabastan yelled.

Somehow, still, some part of Draco's heart dropped out from under him when he heard his father's voice join those shrill bloodthirsty calls for his head.

"You won't escape us, Draco!" Lucius yelled, and Draco's hand clenched around the talon wand like his only and last salvation, wondering if Dantanian had meant all of this to happen, or if he had been a fool all along to listen to his own hallucinations and take them as law. It finally sunk in he may not escape as Lucius said, that he might never see Harry again because of his own arrogance, taking on the entire household of Malfoy Manor on his own, it sunk through him and left him trembling worse. He was glad they couldn't see him through the fire.

"We wait," he heard Bellatrix say decisively, and that was that. A waiting game, until Draco lost the energy to keep up the shield, completely penned in by his own choice, in the depths of the manor where there would be no escape after. One of them lit the torches again, and Draco didn't know how to breathe anymore, and Merlin, was he about to have one of his panic attacks now, *now*...

It had never happened to him in battle before, and thankfully, the brief flash of breathlessness passed him by. Instead was just that sinking feeling that Bellatrix was right and it was just a matter of time, until the sun rose higher and higher in the sky and his energy seeped away from him. The Death Eaters would wait days if they had to, and sooner or later, he would collapse right into their clutches.

"Harry," Draco whispered to himself, feeling a tear escape his eye and slide down his cheek, "Harry, I was wrong, I'm sorry..."

And then as if conjured out of his tears, something appeared before the flames.

Draco thought at first it was a Death Eater somehow having penetrated through, and shot a frantic Sectumsempra at it, but the curse hit the object harmlessly, just leaving dark hissing trails along the floor past it. The object was huge and silver and impossible to comprehend to his shaken mind, until he made out the script of nonsense letters around the great silver rim, and realized he was now facing the Mirror of Ecidyrue. He had been worthy, and the mirror had chosen to show itself at last.

More tears ran down Draco's face in disbelief, approaching the tall silver mirror like he had so many years ago with aimless hesitancy, not sure what to do now that he had his hands on

it. He knew there were anti-Apparition wards in Malfoy Manor, so he couldn't simply whisk himself away with the mirror. He would have to fight his way out.

At the moment, it didn't quite matter as much anymore. "You came for me," Draco whispered, and drew his fingers along the lettering on the mirror, tracing it backwards to read the fatal message, *Only one may climb back out of hell, Eurydice.* Draco hesitated to look directly in the mirror for fear it would do the impossible again and whisk him away into some other shadowed past, when he was needed here and now, he had to get this mirror out and to Harry, to destroy the Horcrux, to destroy everyone that lay in their way.

Draco pocketed his wand and took the mirror by either side in his hands, regarding himself nonetheless. He looked a mess, hair loose and wild around his flushed face with the hood down, black clothes rumpled from falling everywhere, blood on his forehead perhaps from one of his falls. He saw nothing different than he would expect to see in an ordinary mirror, but then, he hadn't the first time drunk in the cellars, had he? Here it was, the mirror that had changed so completely not just his life but his soul, rent everything that was Draco Malfoy apart and put him back together somewhere and someone else.

Here it was, his salvation and his doom, the mirror that would claim his sacrifice at last, if not quite yet. The mirror that would take his life for Severus's to fulfill the Orphean bargain. It was a more beautiful mirror than he remembered, which was not quite enough to make up for what it was going to cost him, taking him from Harry forever.

The mirror did nothing, and Draco wondered suddenly if he was the possessor of all three of the mirrors now. He took the Mirror of Espilce out of his pocket and stared at its comparatively diminutive glass, thinking of the Mirror of Erised so like the Mirror of Ecidyrue in its obelisk in the heart of Xaphan. There was the mirror that showed him Harry, so far away, but still his, and before him the mirror he had used to go into the past, and in his palm the mirror that could call down the moon from the sky, the mirror that he had cut right out of Grindelwald's chest...

The Death Eaters were still calling sporadic taunts, but Draco couldn't even hear them anymore. All he was fixed on was the two mirrors, as slowly, trembling still, he pressed the two of them together.

Nothing, so Draco kept the Mirror of Espilce in his left hand and the talon wand in his right and leaned on the great useless Mirror of Ecidyrue again, enjoying the cold of the pane against his heated face, a part of him wishing he *could* just be sucked into the mirror and away from this danger. He didn't know what the Mirror of Ecidyrue was capable of. He never had, and therein lay the problem, why he had gone afoul of it all those years ago, only to end up here, fighting for his life to fight for Harry Potter... if only he could have seen Harry's face in this, like the Mirror of Erised, a last reminder of what he loved the most in the world before it ended...

Draco's hands held either side of Mirror of Ecidyrue between them, glass cold against his forehead as it reflected a different face. But not Harry Potter's. It was Dantanian Noir who stared back out at him from the glass.

"Dantanian?" Draco whispered, and suddenly he was not quite himself anymore, with a sensation like he was being lifted off his feet. Shattering reflections spread over the Mirror of Ecidyrue like the first time, although they did not shatter Dantanian, whose image remained beneath them as if drawn there indelibly by some painter like him. In his ears, a hauntingly beautiful song began to ring out, as familiar as the lights, and Draco thought with sudden fear if he was disappearing back into the past again, but why, he was so close to getting it right...

Draco was flying, then, even as his feet remained there on the floor of the manor cellars, flying to Xaphan where he could circle the obelisk around like a bird dreaming, seeing the Mirror of Erised before him with Harry's face in it as he had wished, and then turning, turning. He was turning around to the empty places in the obelisk, the imprints waiting there for Ecidyrue and Espilce to return, and he could see the two of them transparently hanging over their places, and then the two remaining mirrors had slipped from his grasp and fallen into place.

A scream arose from nowhere, loud enough to shatter Draco's ears before he realized it was his own voice.

Draco's left hand exploded with pain so sharp he nearly dropped the talon wand from the other hand. It was red, he saw blood dripping down his black sleeve, and he didn't understand until he turned his palm over and saw shards of glass embedded in the skin, reopening the wound he had used to force his way into Malfoy Manor by blood magic. This felt like blood magic, it felt like something great and immense looming over the entire world waiting to strike. It felt like the mirror had broken in his hand, and it had.

The Mirror of Espilce had shattered apart.

"No," Draco gasped in horror, after everything he had been through to call that mirror his own. But then he looked up, and what he saw stopped his heart.

Dantanian Noir, all dressed in shimmering silver, stepped out of the mirror.

"You're not real," Draco said shakily, and then he realized the flames around him were waning low, low enough for the Death Eaters to see inside the circle.

"DANTANIAN!" shrieked Bellatrix, with the sound of as much reverence as fear. "Dantanian, it's Dantanian Noir..."

From the look of it, few of her companions knew who she meant, the way Mother would have. Mother was missing.

Still, the others could see him. Cries of *Who is that man* and *How did he get there* testified to that. So either Draco was hearing things too, or Dantanian Noir had really just stepped out of that mirror.

"You can't be real," Draco said to Dantanian, and was rewarded with the sweetest of small smiles from that eerie doll face, dark eyes lighting up just for him. He knew the words nonsensical even as he spoke them, with Bellatrix seeing and knowing him too. They still had

to be, because this couldn't be true, Dantanian standing there with a beating pulse like anyone else, alive again.

"Thank you, little dragon," Dantanian breathed, and then Draco could feel that pulse beside his own as Dantanian enfolded him in a tight embrace, one that smelled sweetly of some exotic flower. Dantanian felt slight and yet sharp as a whip, presence disquieting in its willowy strength. He whispered in Draco's ear, "Thank you for bringing me back to life."

Draco pulled back to face Dantanian again, the flames still lingering flicking through the air enough to deter the mystified Death Eaters watching them. Dantanian's beauty made him appear something other than human, he was simply too perfect- except not truly perfect, though, because the resemblance to Aunt Bella had never been stronger than in the flesh. Maybe that was what made Draco shy away from his touch and regard him as a threat and not a new ally appeared to him.

"I didn't mean to," Draco whispered. "What happened? What have I done?"

Dantanian rolled his eyes lightly, sweetly, pushing Draco's hair out of his face. "You don't need to worry about it or anything else. Don't trouble yourself. I'll take care of everything from now on."

"How are you..." Doom sounded in Draco's ears, the remembered sight of a moon pulled down from the sky, except now that mirror was shattered and slipped inside Draco's pocket. The Mirror of Ecidyrue was fully intact and unaltered, reflecting the two of them standing together. "How are you going to do that? Are you going to save me?"

"Yes, my love," Dantanian said, clasping his hand, "Like I always do, I am going to save you."

Then he turned away from Draco, and Draco wanted to grab him by the shoulder, but his misgivings were such he dared not touch Dantanian again. "Wait," Draco said behind him, not the time to ask, but it was burning at his mind, as the answer to everything he needed to understand about Dantanian Noir. "What happened to you? What happened in Australia? When the dragon killed all those people in that massacre- were you its victim? Or did you want it to happen?"

"Oh, little dragon," Dantanian said, turning to him pityingly. "It seems there is still so much you have yet to understand. Don't worry, I will explain everything. I just have to deal with this for you first. As for Australia- Draco, I wasn't the dragon's victim. *I was the dragon.*"

And then the cellar's roof rumbled and caved in upon them as Dantanian Noir coiled up in the air and became something else, silvery and scaled and massive. The cellars were torn apart as he expanded from human to magical creature, a single graceful whirling motion and he was rearing up tossing rubble aside with a flick of his long neck and staring down at Draco with great purple eyes. The Death Eaters screamed and used their magic to keep the falling stone off them, only to stare up in horror at what had shown up before them like an apparition in a fairytale.

Dantanian had become an Antipodean Opaleye, the most beautiful of dragons.

Astaroth was come to life again.

Dantanian Noir

Draco's wall of blue fire fell away in amazement as they all stared up at the dragon erupting from the cellars of Malfoy Manor, silver and blue like a Patronus but more ivory and violet too, iridescent in what the collapse of the roofs above now revealed to be the beginning of sunrise. For a moment Draco felt as helpless and vulnerable to the dragon as the rest of them, until Dantanian settled on a pile of rubble with light filtering in from above him and outstretched a wing to Draco.

"You want me to climb on your back?" Draco asked disbelievingly, and the dragon nodded.

Draco wasn't slow in obeying, seeing the Death Eaters picking themselves up from the landslide they'd been caught in. He scrambled up the glimmering wing and onto the dragon's back, where he held on for dear life as Dantanian took flight. *So we're escaping,* he thought dizzily, almost wanting to protest leaving the Mirror of Ecidyrue behind them, but none of that was up to him anymore. Dantanian had taken full control. When he could become a dragon, he gained that right.

Draco could only crane his neck down to stare at the huge hole Dantanian had left emerging from Malfoy Manor, wondering if he was seeing his old home for the very last time.

And then Dantanian turned in the air, whooshing down, and reared upon Malfoy Manor again.

"Dantanian!" Draco screamed, clutching onto him harder, trying to adjust to the surreal sensation of riding a dragon. It didn't take too much work on his behalf, since Dantanian was so massive that Draco would have had to work to fall all the way off, but Draco had never imagined riding a dragon, the dizzying sensation of flying through the air on such a great beast. He'd imagined becoming a dragon before, but never riding one.

And he'd certainly never dreamed of the warm sensation of the scales beneath him heating from proximity, as the neck underneath Draco's grasp began to grow hotter. It was only a moment before that warming sensation gave way to a wave of fire down upon the Manor.

"DANTANIAN!" Draco screamed harder, trying to attract the dragon's attention, but it was useless with Dantanian homed in now. Dantanian sent down fire in a great gust, collapsing the front entrance to the manor with a shock of falling stone, and then he was breathing out flame upon the foyer, before rocketing around higher to cast fire over more of the building.

The Death Eaters were still alive, somehow, Draco saw out of the corner of his eye, fleeing the manor with great shrill cries, like birds of prey happened upon by a higher predator. Bellatrix's huge strong shield held back fire from crashing on her, but Rodolphus, perhaps still dazed from snakes choking his neck, had his shield break under the sheer blast of the flame, and crashed to the ground stunned. Dantanian whirled upon the party of them and roared fire over the place they all had been, and caught Rodolphus right in the front.

Bellatrix screamed as she ran and her husband died, caught up from the ground by Dantanian into his outstretched slavering mouth, where he began to devour him. Half of Rodolphus broke off and fell to the ground oozing blood and guts before Dantanian swooped to gobble up the rest of his prey. Draco was screaming his head off too, nauseous from more than just the unpredictable motion of the dragon beneath him, trapped upon a machine of death.

Dantanian seemed distracted then by demolishing the manor, enough that the Death Eaters must have thought they had a chance of getting away, perhaps that they would manage to pass the anti-Apparition wards on the manor and Apparate away from the horror being visited upon them from above.

The Death Eaters were mistaken. It was hard for them to pick their way out through great piles of stone and ash, and Dantanian came whirling back around towards them at breakneck pace, just the whoosh of air from his swirling tail enough to fell them all.

Realizing themselves caught, the Death Eaters began to shoot spells up at Dantanian, fight instead of flight at this unholy monster of death. "Dantanian, wait," Draco said feebly, "My mother," but he couldn't make out her head of long blonde hair beneath them, just his father's, defiant in the increasing sunrise.

The curses bounced off Dantanian's tough hide, the supposedly deadly green light being barreled his way by Bellatrix having no more effect than Cauterizo had on an unbranded Lucius Malfoy. Dantanian made a croaking noise that almost sounded like a laugh, vibrating his whole neck beneath Draco, before raining fire down upon them. Bellatrix shrieked as her dress and hair caught alight, put out by frantic water spells, while Rabastan fell under the barrage of flames, the odor of singed flesh filling the morning air disgustingly. Father stumbled out of range only to fall face-first into a pile of the ruins of what had once been his great family home.

Dantanian lunged down and caught up Rabastan in his mouth, chewing him in half the same as his brother, and blood rained down too upon Bellatrix and Father, putting out the last remnants of fire upon them. Bellatrix and Father tried to climb out from underneath and slipped on the blood over stone. Draco covered his eyes, shaking, as Dantanian devoured Rabastan, innards slipping out as Dantanian feasted on the charred flesh.

"Avada Kedavra!" Bellatrix bellowed, and Draco realized too late that the curse was meant not for Dantanian but for the slight boy shaking on top of him. Dantanian spun and lifted an unhurtable wing in the way of the green light, and then let out a growl that shook the foundations of the broken Manor beneath them. Dantanian had been devouring the Manor whole already, but now he was angry.

"Father!" Draco yelled, "Run!" somewhere not wanting to see his father eaten alive despite everything, but it was no use. He could only hold on as part of the proceedings atop Dantanian as the dragon breathed fire down upon him over and over, singing him to ash where he stood. Lucius screamed the most indescribably awful scream, writhing under the torture of the flames, but there was nothing he or Draco could do. Father disappeared in a wave of blood and fire, only for Dantanian to leap down catlike to lap greedily at the ashes of what had once been Lucius Malfoy.

At last it was just Bellatrix, who had stopped running. In the face of the massacre, somehow, her dagger's-edge high laugh was sounding out again over the ruins, giddy from the destruction even as she faced it at her own peril. Or perhaps she did not think so, as the words that spilled from her mouth were unbelievable. She opened her arms wide, regardless of having sent the Killing curse in their direction just seconds ago, and cried out gleefully, "My Dantanian has returned to me!"

Dantanian hesitated, fire not spurting out as Draco expected, and Draco's already turbulent stomach flipped, at the thought that of all people mercy would be shown for Bellatrix Lestrange. Bellatrix was encouraged by the rampaging dragon coming to a still, racing forward to press her face against his haunches. Draco raised his wand, preparing to deal the killing blow himself as she screamed, "He won't hurt me, not again, never again, my Dantanian," and Dantanian kicked her away off him with a snap of his leg.

She went flying into the pile of ash that had once been Lucius Malfoy, stunned at the blow. She picked herself up regardless, wand in hand. "Dantanian!" she shrieked, facing down the dragon unafraid. "Just try and kill me, Dantanian!"

He lunged at her, and the explosion of rubble she sent flying in his face brought him to a halt in the air. Draco screamed, the rocks ripping up at his arms and threatening to shake him off Dantanian, and Bellatrix darted away from Dantanian's returning salvo of breathing heavy fire down upon her, dodging it with uncanny ease. "Dantanian!" she shrieked, "Remember, remember, Dantanian," and threw a fallen statue into his face.

Dantanian caught it with a gust of flame that kept it from hurting him where he seemed most vulnerable, his eyes. "Sectumsempra!" Draco screamed, and caught Bellatrix unawares, if not totally. She jerked back from the curse, but her arm came clean off her, blood spurting out from the joint into the smoke-laden air, the appendage flying off into the dust. It was her wand arm. She fell to the ground, bellowing in agony even as her remaining arm searched frantically for her wand in the small broken stones.

Dantanian caught her finally with the fire then. The desperate look on her face, a face so like Dantanian's had been, so like Astarte Noir's, went up in flames along with the rest of her, making her race about and shriek, but to no avail, as wave after wave of fire came down like the heavens themselves punishing her at last, except it was Draco, Draco on the back of this killing machine watching Dantanian burn her, and Draco thought he would be glad.

But he found nothing more than shocked numbness to greet the sight of Bellatrix Lestrange's burning head torn off her body by Dantanian's teeth, before he ripped into the rest of her and tore that too.

When Dantanian left the scene of Bellatrix's death, Draco didn't know where he was going. Until he saw his mother below them, lying prone unconscious in a pile of debris, her pregnant stomach visible with how she lay on her side, helpless. She must have retreated from the melee before the others went down to the cellars, either because of damage to herself or a lack of desire to see her son caught and taken down. She had fallen under descending rubble, and there was blood on her face, but she looked alive.

For now. Dantanian was advancing on her.

Draco could feel the rumble under the scales, the preparation of fire. "Stop!" he cried out, but Dantanian didn't seem to be listening, not moving from the place where he'd landed just before Mother. So Draco slid off the dragon, using the wing to climb down. It was still a hard fall the rest of the way.

Dantanian's head turned away from Mother to Draco, who darted in front of him as quickly as he could. All he could think of now was the necessity of getting his body between his mother and the dragon. Draco didn't think Dantanian would hurt him, after all he had said. And he'd seemed conscious with a human mind enough to beckon Draco to ride him. Unless he had entered some kind of bloodthirsty frenzy by now, but Draco had no choice but to risk that. He couldn't let Dantanian eat his unconscious mother alive.

Dantanian's nostrils flared as he took in where Draco had placed himself. Fear soaked Draco's whole body with clammy sweat, fear that worsened with every second of awareness just how helpless he was to keep the dragon from having his way. "Please! Please, Dantanian, stop! She's my mother!"

There was no response, not in Dantanian's narrowed eyes, so Draco kept begging. "Please, you can't kill her, I won't let you," he said nonsensically, and then more bravely, "You'd have to kill us both." No response, and Draco fell to his knees, clasping his hands before himself pleading. "Please don't kill us," he said, and closed his eyes shut, to wait for whatever fate would come.

There was a strange twisting and snapping noise, but Draco didn't dare open his eyes yet. Then there was a human hand on Draco's own. Dantanian Noir's fingertips danced along Draco's palm, like the aftertaste of a nightmare of wildfire, before his lips met Draco's own.

Dantanian tasted of blood. When he pulled back from the kiss, he was licking his lips.

He took Draco by the shoulder and drew him up off his knees. The man who had killed Bellatrix Lestrange regarded him with infinite tenderness.

"Calm down, Draco," Dantanian said confidently, "You have to know by now that I would never hurt you," and reached into his own mouth, what looked like down his own throat, that long graceful swanlike throat. He was lovely, even covered in blood and ash as he was, even as his fingers withdrew from his mouth with the Elder wand between them.

Of course he would be its master now, after what he had done to Bellatrix. Draco fought the mad urge to fall to his knees again in sheer terror.

"Your mother, however, is another story," Dantanian said, sidestepping Draco and raising the Elder wand over Mother's body.

"Stop," Draco said with a trembling voice, somehow gaining the fortitude to reach into his pocket and withdraw the talon wand, though he was almost sure it wouldn't work on Dantanian. His fingertips caught on the fragments of the Mirror of Espilce there, and bled.

"Stop or I'll have to hurt you," said Draco, and Dantanian turned to level him with a politely incredulous look before the bastard dragon laughed, outright laughed, prettily and without

spite, at the notion that Draco could hurt him.

Draco tried argument for lack of anything else, much as he feared Dantanian might have gone mad. "She's pregnant! You'll kill the child too."

"Such a pity."

"She's my mother, Dantanian! Don't say you're going to protect me and then turn against my mother!"

"I've already killed your father for you," Dantanian said silkily, as if at any moment expecting congratulations.

"Mother's different!" Draco cried, feeling even as he did utterly impotent.

"Is she?" Dantanian said mildly, all civility in the face of Draco's passionate imploring, with a light of intellect in his large dark eyes that suggested perhaps, maybe even more terrifyingly, this man was not mad after all.

"She has not been a mother to you," Dantanian went on. "Not truly. She has neglected you your whole life, left you to your father's violence-"

"She lied to the Dark Lord for me!" Draco screamed, only realizing too late that was from the blue loop.

Except on top of it all Dantanian seemed to know everything. He didn't blink an eye as he countered, "But that was in another life."

"She's my mother," Draco kept saying, as if that meant anything- except it should to Dantanian. "I would think you of all people would know the importance of a mother-"

"My mother was nothing like yours," Dantanian interrupted with the first hint of anger in his voice. "Astarte Noir was perfect."

"Listen, I know my mother's part of House Black," Draco said wildly, stabbing in the dark, "But I am too, and you're not going to kill me, so there goes your grand mission of wiping our house from the earth-"

"That is no longer my mission," intoned Dantanian, and reached out and carefully took the talon wand and put it in Draco's pocket. Then he pocketed the Elder wand himself within his bloodstained silver robes, as if to show killing Mother had been placed off the table for now.

"Oh, Draco," Dantanian said, tilting his dark head back as the sun burned in the sky behind him with ashes floating before it from the massacre he had wrought. "What a strange feeling, to live. To be alive again at your side."

"If you're on my side," Draco blurted, not wanting to antagonize this man but unable to stop himself, "Why didn't you ever talk to me? You were inside my wand, weren't you? Why didn't you ever answer me when I called for you, the way I know you did for Aunt Bella?"

"Because, little one," Dantanian said, looking poetically melancholy at the words, "I fear speaking to her all those years helped drive her insane. I did not want the same fate for you. I tried to aid you in other ways."

"You taught me spells you made," Draco realized. "Verniculpa, Protego Diabolica, Dracosanguis. That saved my life." Dantanian inclined his head in agreement, and the words tore out of Draco despite the awe-inspiring circumstances, standing over his mother's unconscious body, facing a man who should have been dead more than a century ago. "But you messed with me. You made me hear and see things that weren't there."

"I was a mere presence inside the wand," Dantanian said thoughtfully. "Even I was not always in control. But I did give you back the Longbottoms when you asked. And see, what I could do was keep you or anyone else from speaking of your true past..."

"What do you mean?" Draco said, blinking rapidly. "I thought it was the mirror. *You* were the reason I get Langlock whenever I try to talk about the blue loop?" Dantanian nodded, and Draco's mind reeled. "And why Grindelwald couldn't talk to Harry about it. Merlin, why would you do that to me? I was so lost..."

"I thought it the best way to protect you," Dantanian said without shame, but Draco was full of grievances of times that his wand had seemed to do anything but try and protect him.

"You nearly got Hermione killed in second year, making my tracking spell on her not work-"

"Again, I was trying to protect you. I knew from your notebooks that she would be facing a Basilisk. I would not have you put yourself in harm's way then-"

"You came to me after I killed Theo, and told me it had been you-"

Dantanian said simply, "I was trying to comfort you."

"So it was me. Still. *I* chose to kill Theo. But when I was fighting at the Ministry- when I heard Mr. Nott start to say the Killing curse and it was really just Incarcerous- that was you then, wasn't it?"

"No," Dantanian said quietly, as if already dreading Draco's reaction. "No, Draco, that was you."

"No," Draco breathed, transfixed in horror. All this time he'd blamed his wand. It couldn't be him to have misheard and killed by mistake. "It couldn't be. No, you're lying."

Dantanian spread his arms wide. "Why would I lie? Draco, I would spare you this pain if I could. But I will never lie to you again."

"No." Draco felt a prickling behind his eyes. "No, please, no, it can't be my fault..."

Dantanian gently took Draco by the arm and led him away from his mother's body, where they settled near the Mirror of Ecidyrue. It was the one piece of all the manor still fully intact and shining. Draco sank to the ground and began to sob, and Dantanian took him by the

shoulder and hugged Draco to his side, a pernicious bit of intimacy from the presence that had been with him for years knowing and seeing everything.

Draco didn't know why he was crying so hard. He didn't know how much was that terrible new revelation, and how much just the shock of what he had experienced this evil day, the sights that had been placed before him that could never be effaced from him now. Whatever it was, such monstrous sobs escaped him, he found himself pressing his tear-swollen face into Dantanian's sleek curly hair.

Suddenly a voice broke their tear-filled reverie, as their attention was dragged upwards again to the Mirror of Ecidyrue. Somehow, they'd both missed Mother waking up and making her way over to them. Now she stood before the mirror, remarking, "These words are backwards, aren't they? What do they really mean?"

Narcissa Malfoy was the face in the mirror, the Mirror of Ecidyrue risen before her with tears streaking the blood in falling patches over her face. Mother held her stomach and stared at the words on the mirror.

"Only one," Draco's mother read out, "May climb back out of hell." Then she turned and said, "When did we climb down?"

"Mother," Draco said, grabbing hold of Dantanian's wand hand and not letting go. "Run."

"Who are you?" Mother asked instead, seeming dazed by the impact as she picked her fearless way over to Dantanian. "Draco, who is this? What happened? What became of the dragon?"

Dantanian bared his teeth at her. "Do you really want to know?"

"Mother! You have to run now!" Draco cried out hysterically, "He wants to kill you," and even dazed, this time Mother didn't need to be told twice. She took one look at Dantanian and whatever she saw there made her stumble away from him.

Then she reached into her pocket, withdrew her wand, and shakily, face as tear-stained as Draco's, raised it and Apparated away from them. It seemed the anti-Apparition wards hadn't survived smoke and hellfire.

Dantanian's lips were warm against Draco's ear as he whispered, "You will regret that one day."

Draco took that to mean he would regret letting Mother live, not as a direct threat from Dantanian for defying him. "No," Draco said, "I won't," and picked himself up off the ground and away from Dantanian.

They stared at each other then, through the smoke and falling ash and haze of golden sunlight. "How are you a dragon?" Draco asked finally, for lack of anything else to say to this man who had so often held Draco's fate in his invisible hands. "You became a dragon at Cathedral Reserve, and you slaughtered everyone..."

"The Mirror of Espilce," Dantanian said, "Can do a great many things."

Suddenly, Draco understood better why Grindelwald had given up on the Mirror of Espilce, and hidden it inside his own chest, lest another take its power.

"As for the massacre, I was not used to my new form. I do not remember it well, but I must have lost control then. It will never happen again."

Draco stared out at the ruins that had been his childhood home and reflected how this seemed to be an instance of Dantanian *in control.*

"And- what happened? What brought you back to life?"

"I don't know," Dantanian said, and frowned. "I knew joining the three mirrors would do something powerful, but not that. Do you have the Mirror of Espilce?"

As if in a dream, the words flitted through Draco's head on the Mirror of Espilce: *Even death may die in the dawning of the eclipse.* "It's broken," Draco said, and when Dantanian gestured for it, Draco handed it over, being careful not to cut himself again as he dropped the large shards into Dantanian's palm.

"As if some ritual shattered it," Dantanian breathed, looking genuinely taken aback at the sight- or was that wounded?

"All I did was bring it and the Mirror of Ecidyrue together. And my wand," Draco said wonderingly.

"And it seems that was enough," intoned Dantanian, before he turned his dark gaze on Draco with its full unnerving force. "Little dragon, I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I must leave you now."

"No! You can't!" Draco immediately cried out, not sure if he was fearful of being left or of what Dantanian might do somewhere without him there. But it was useless. Dantanian turned away anyway.

"Wait!" Draco yelled desperately. "Where are you going?"

Dantanian turned back and smiled at him as he said, "To fix this mirror."

The Mirror of Espilce was still in Dantanian's possession, as he flicked the Elder wand through the air and disappeared, Apparating away and leaving Draco in a realm full of blood and ash.

Draco sat there some time, trying to make sense of a world that had gone mad around him and left him in the ruins. Then he gathered himself, put one hand on the Mirror of Ecidyrue and the other on a random piece of rock, and whispered, "Portus."

He saw the hellscape he was escaping whirl around him as the Portkey took him away, Malfoy Manor turned to nothing but fallen stones and lingering flames. And then he was really away, and fallen in the snow. He was in the garden at L'Infern, which in his absence had somehow been wrecked.

He fell forward until his face crumpled against the icicles of the hazelnut tree, and he was crying again, as Luna's voice asked,

"Did you bring me back Tom Riddle?"

The Lifted Curse

It was some time after Draco arrived that he could gather himself together enough to tell his story. In the meantime, Luna sat with him, and the trio went off to the side to frantically discuss what could have happened to him.

"Well, he must have gone to Malfoy Manor, to have gotten that mirror," Ron said logically. "That's the Mirror of Ecidyrue like he wanted, isn't it?"

Hermione stopped before it and stared at the inscription like Mother had. The urge to cry out for them all to stay away from it rose in Draco's throat, but he didn't speak. "Only one may climb out of hell: Eurydice. Yes, that is the mirror."

"How could he have done it, though?" Ron marveled.

"What do you mean?" said a grim-faced Harry.

"I mean, stolen it from all that lot. And all by himself."

The trio hadn't seemed to think they could be heard where Luna sat comforting Draco, but the words reached Luna's ears nonetheless.

"Of course he could have," Luna said indignantly. "Look what he's done. Draco can do anything."

"No, they're right," Draco said, fighting to stabilize his voice in his smoke-aching throat. "You were all right. I shouldn't have gone alone. I'm so, so sorry."

Harry walked back over, the sight of him overwhelming and threatening to draw out more tears, so sure Draco had been he would never see Harry again. "You're right, you shouldn't have gone on your own. It was so terrible of you, Draco. Do you have any idea how it felt to wake up in our bed this morning and find you weren't there-"

All Draco could do was hang his head and say, "I'm sorry. I know I ruined it. I ruined everything."

"Emotions are high right now," Hermione said, cutting between the two of them with her usual crisp logic. "But Draco isn't in a state yet to be answering questions. Let's get him inside and warmed up. Luna, why don't you go and get him some tea?"

The others obliged, though Harry still looked wretched, and they all took care of Draco before asking anything else of him. Ron levitated the Mirror of Ecidyrue inside the room with them, while Hermione healed his face along with slashed-up fingertips and palm, and Luna went off to get him that tea. Harry lingered in the background with that awful betrayed look on his adorable face, not seeming sure what to do.

Draco beckoned him over. "Come give me a hug, Harry," he said weakly, and incredibly, Harry did, hugging Draco so tightly, he felt like he might burst.

"I could have lost you today," Harry said thickly into Draco's hair, and when Draco turned to look at Harry head-on, their lips slid together in a truly frustrated kiss. It was a kiss nonetheless, and Draco refused to let go of Harry afterwards, sitting beside Harry telling him over and over he was sorry. The only other thing he asked was what had happened to the garden.

Ron gave him that answer, which Harry seemed reluctant to. "When Harry found out you were gone, he went into a fit. Like a rage. His uncontrollable magic tore it all up. But Hermione says she thinks it can be restored someday..."

Once Draco finally had his strong black tea clutched in both his cold hands, the others took their seats around him, looking torn between considerateness and a burning desire for information. Draco felt at last the strength to oblige them, so he began. "I went to Malfoy Manor alone- which was a mistake, I'm so sorry- and I thought I could get in and out without anyone hearing me, but I was wrong. Aunt Bella caught me sneaking in and woke all the others, so she went after me, and soon they were all chasing me down in the cellars..."

"How exciting!" Luna said, cheeks propped on her hands, and didn't wilt at the look the others gave her.

"I was cornered, behind Protego Diabolica, when the mirror appeared to me. Just out of nowhere it was there for me."

"For a worthy member of House Malfoy," Ron said, and Draco grinned nervously.

"Turns out that disowning didn't really take," he deadpanned, to not even a chuckle. "Anyway, I looked in it, and I brought it together with the Mirror of Espilce, and something happened... something I guess none of you will believe. Even I don't really believe it."

"Ooh, ooh, what?" went Luna, clapping her hands together as Draco leaned his head tiredly on Harry's shoulder to say,

"Dantanian Noir came back to life."

It did take some time then to make them understand, let alone believe him. Ron took on that face like he wanted to call Draco a liar but didn't dare. Hermione got that compassionate pitying look that always made Draco feel like St. Mungo's was in his future. And Harry just stiffened beside him, deadly quiet. Only Luna, daughter of the editor of the Quibbler, seemed to take this piece of news relatively in stride.

"If you could see the state of Malfoy Manor, you'd believe me," Draco said, closing his eyes. He could hardly believe his own words. He found he didn't want to, they were too terrible. "He changed into the dragon Astaroth and killed everyone but my mother."

"Not your mother?" said Luna, as if that was the most remarkable part of the sentence.

"I begged for her life," Draco admitted softly.

All he could do was go through the whole story more slowly, step-by-step then for them, drawing out exclamations of shock and horror. Except for one crucial fact.

"Bellatrix Lestrange is dead?" Harry breathed, sounding stunned, while Luna clapped her little hands together and Ron looked downright thrilled. Hermione had a more measured look on her face.

"Yes, she is dead, and I know I should be glad- I am glad, it's just- my father died too," Draco said hollowly. *He* lived *in the blue loop.* "And I know we'd hurt each other before, that he would probably have always been my enemy- I just- maybe I don't think I wanted him dead. At least not the way he died."

Hermione smiled at him gently, full of grace. "Compassion doesn't make you weak, Draco. You have a right to feel the way you feel. Especially after what you've been through."

"He took the Mirror of Espilce," Draco blurted, unable to keep another weight he felt pressing down so damningly on him. Not in the face of Hermione's undeserved sweetness. "Dantanian did. The mirror broke when Dantanian came back to life, so he took it and said he'd fix it, before he left. So if you were thinking we had all three mirrors now and I was the master of the mirrors- to destroy Horcruxes- no, none of that bullshit is true, none of it is going to happen now."

"Draco, it's alright," Harry said, forestalling the torrent of self-recrimination and touching his still-clammy hands. "We're just so glad that you survived."

Draco's throat was very sore by the time he was getting ready for bed. Between the smoke he'd inhaled and the amount of time he'd talked today, going over every minute detail for Hermione, he had nearly gone mute. But Harry went off to Hermione and she found in her endless bag a potion for it. So Draco took it and had his voice restored- which was a good thing, since with everyone else gone to sleep in their own rooms and the two of them alone, Harry seemed to want to talk.

Merlin. If Draco had been through all this just for Harry to try and break up with him again-

It didn't seem so, though, not with them in their pajamas in the firelight, still sharing the same bed. Harry asked instead, "I still don't understand why you felt you had to go alone."

Tiredness drew foolish honesty. "Because I needed to be alone to handle the Mirror of Ecidyrue."

"Why?" Harry said, with blue flamelight playing through his tousled dark hair like a diffused halo.

"Because the mirror is special to me," Draco said, half-surprised his tongue was letting him say this much. He expected the Langlock to kick in any second, and was completely

unprepared for his tongue to let him blurt out, "Because I've been through the Mirror of Ecidyrue."

Harry sat up in bed beside him, looking intrigued. "What do you mean by that?"

Draco bit his tongue, but it showed no signs of leaving his control. He tried experimentally to say, "It takes you back in time," and the words did come out. Harry just listened eagerly, even if he wasn't quite following anymore.

"No," Draco breathed, "The Langlock's not working," fingers flying to his tongue- except of course it wasn't working. In all the chaos, one thing Dantanian had told him was that he'd been the one doing it to him, keeping him from speaking of the blue loop. And now Dantanian wasn't in his wand anymore. The blocking presence was gone.

But maybe it was his nerve failing, but he lied to Harry again instead. "I don't know what I'm saying, I'm so tired. Please, Harry, can we talk about this when we've both had some sleep?"

"Alright, dragon," Harry said, looking a bit taken aback until Draco gave him a silencing kiss. Harry sighed and leaned into the goodnight kiss, seeming to need it just as much as Draco, then rolled over to hug Draco from behind and cuddle together in their bed. His grip was strong, as if to keep Draco from sneaking off again anytime soon.

Harry got to sleep quickly after the stress of the day, breath soon evening out behind Draco. But Draco could hardly say the same. His mind kept racing with the possibilities of what he'd just discovered about himself, what he now had the power to say to anyone whenever he wanted. It raced long past it was comfortable, what was surely hours passing with Draco lying in Harry's comfortable embrace with Harry asleep and Draco still awake, still tormented by reflections that given the chance, he had lied to Harry still.

It came to the point that Draco rolled over, out of Harry's grasp, and kissed Harry awake. Harry was drowsy at first, roused from the midst of a dream, which he whispered had been about him and Draco. "What's wrong, Draco, can't sleep?" Harry said sleepily, "Do you want some more kisses, or..." and Draco gratefully accepted a kiss, even as his mind was reeling and stabbing at him.

In that moment, finally, it didn't feel like he had a choice, or that despite it being the middle of the night, he could wait a single second longer. He knew what he had to do.

"Harry," Draco said, not thinking in that moment of any of the consequences. "I woke you up because I have to tell you something. It's something else you'll find hard to believe. But I promise you, it's the truth. I used the Mirror of Ecidyrue when I was eighteen-"

"What do you mean, when you were eighteen. You're seventeen now," said Harry, blinking himself more awake, and put an arm around Draco where they were facing each other now. Draco wondered at what point that arm would be removed.

"I was eighteen," Draco said firmly, "And I was in the cellars of Malfoy Manor, and I found the mirror. I didn't know what I was doing, but the mirror worked, and it took me back in

time, Harry, I swear on anything you believe in that it did. It took me back to when I had been eleven. I've traveled through time, you see. And you don't believe me, do you?"

"I just- I don't get what you mean," Harry said, seeming to manage to fully get himself awake for this story. His fingers smoothed over Draco's shoulder. "What are you saying, that you're a time traveler? What in the world? Why are you saying this now?"

"Because Dantanian was stopping me from telling, from inside my wand," Draco said impatiently. It all seemed so straightforward to him, it was impossible Harry could be this slow in apprehending it. "And now I can tell you, for the first time. Don't you want me to tell you the truth?"

"Of course I do, dragon," Harry said soothingly. "Calm down. I promise I'll listen to whatever you have to tell me." Draco couldn't tell if that was his humoring-the-lunatic voice. "You're saying you lived to eighteen, then you went back to when you were eleven? That you traveled through time?"

"Didn't you ever wonder," Draco said a bit bitterly, "Why I was so good at magic back then? It's because I was an eleven-year-old with an eighteen-year-old's memories and magic inside me."

"What?" Harry breathed, suddenly looking to grasp something of the gravity of it. "You always were so powerful, so out of place back then..."

"Because I had traveled in time," Draco said with all the patience he could muster. "The mirror took me, and my life changed. Everything changed. I had the chance to relive the past seven years. To redo them."

Harry sat up further and cupped Draco's face in his hands. "You're serious about all this, aren't you. You were really... you *were* different and strange when I met you."

"And I was crying," Draco said forcefully, "The day we met, you remember, because I had gotten Aunt Bella's wand for myself. That didn't happen in the blue loop."

"The blue loop?"

Draco's confession was forestalled then by the need to explain the terms he'd gleaned from McGonagall all those years ago, and relay her explanation of how time travel must have worked in his case. He used his wand to draw pictures in the air to explain, and Harry listened intently, seeming to grasp by now that something was happening to him that would alter everything when it came to the one he said he loved.

"So I think I get what you're saying now," Harry said, "The red line and the blue loop. What we're in now is the red line. And the blue loop is only in your memories. You remember a different version of all of these years we've known each other. Draco, it's so hard to believe..."

"Believe it," Draco said intently, "Because I want you to know everything about me now, Harry, and then we can see if you still love me."

"What are you talking about?" Harry frowned. "You can see I still care for you the same, even after what you pulled last night, so..."

"Harry," Draco said tightly, "I was a really different person the first time around." To ensure a sleepy Harry was fully focused on him, he climbed onto Harry's lap to straddle him as he delivered the fatal words, the silk of their pajamas sliding together. Harry wrapped his arms around him in response, exhaling hard at the feeling of them coming together, and maybe this contact would be enough to make Harry hate him just a little less when everything was revealed.

"In your- past loop. Were we still together?" Harry asked naively, only to look alarmed at the bitterness of Draco's laughter.

"Harry, *everything* was different. Do you want me to tell it from the beginning?" Harry nodded, grip on Draco so tight it was like he feared something irretrievable was about to slip out of his grasp. He had scarcely ever looked so beautiful to Draco as he did in that moment, just barely visible in the nighttime dark.

"Harry, our first meeting went... another way. I acted all arrogant, and it put you off. When we first met at Hogwarts, you were with Ron who was laughing at my family, and you refused to shake my hand."

"No!" Harry said loyally. "That's impossible! Draco, from the first time we met, I was- fascinated by you, if you've got to know, alright? I was thinking of you for weeks after. I never would have brushed you off."

"You did," Draco said with a sinking feeling deep inside him, "And we became rivals."

"Hermione must have hated that," Harry said with a nervous laugh, and Draco closed his eyes tightly for a moment.

"Harry, Hermione and I weren't friends either, the first time around. Neither were me and Ron. Not at all. We all hated each other. We were enemies, from that first year at Hogwarts onwards."

"How could I ever hate you?" Harry asked simply, and when he saw the broken look in Draco's eyes, he leaned forward and gave Draco a kiss that melted him down to his bones. It almost took the will away for Draco to keep talking, made Draco want to push for sex instead and let this be it for what he told Harry, let sleeping dogs lie. But then Harry was the one to pull back and regard him intelligently, waiting for an answer to his question. How indeed could Harry have ended up hating Draco Malfoy?

"I was- different back then," Draco kept saying. "I *was* friends with the other Slytherins in my year, but mostly Vince and Greg. They followed me around like lackeys."

"Like they did with Zabini?"

"Yes. I was- Harry, I was a bully. I picked on people. And not just your- your average schoolyard bully. I believed in blood purity. I called Hermione a Mudblood. I believed in all

of that, because that's what my parents taught me. That's why I would never have been friends with Hermione, or Ron the blood traitor. Hermione was just a Mudblood to me. And I didn't think Muggleborns belonged at Hogwarts."

"That can't have been you, even in the past," Harry said with fixed certainty, and Draco didn't understand this misplaced faith in him. He gave Harry another quick kiss to encourage him to listen, adjusting his arms where he had them locked around Harry's neck.

"You remember my father? I was like a miniature version of him. I believed what he believed." Harry frowned as if he only still half-believed what Draco was saying, so Draco plowed on recklessly. "But I'm not now, you know that, so this is my chance to get it right this time..."

"You really were on that side?" Harry asked curiously, and Draco bit his lip, seeing the part he had dreaded coming up on him.

"Harry," Draco said, and took a deep breath before telling the worst truth. "I was a Death Eater."

"WHAT?" Harry cried out, and tried instinctively to pull back from Draco. Draco kept his weight pinning Harry down at the waist, sliding his hands into Harry's hair to try and maintain any kind of hold on him he could. "No! What are you talking about, that can't be..."

"The summer after my father went to Azkaban," Draco said heavily, "Aunt Bella trained me, and I took the Dark Mark." The bitterness of the words made him want to bite through his tongue sooner than speak them all, and to Harry of all people. "Here, it was here," Draco said, and let one arm go of Harry to pull back his blue sleeve and reveal his pale, unmarked forearm. "I had the Dark Mark there."

"No," Harry said, staring at the bared skin like he found it too beautiful to think it ever could have been sullied that way. "No, Draco, I can't believe it, you're lying. I don't know why, but you're lying."

Draco kissed Harry, but didn't feel any answer, so he pulled back nervously. "Harry, I promise, I will never lie to you again." In some distant part of him, he registered that he sounded a bit like Dantanian. "I was on the other side. I was a Death Eater."

"No," Harry said, and kept saying, holding Draco's unmarked arm as if that was proof Draco was lying. "I don't know why you'd say that, Draco, but it can't be the truth." What was it? *I can't be in love with a Death Eater?* Draco wished he could reach inside Harry's brain and answer every doubt, but it was to no avail. Harry fell to a melancholy silence at last, staring at Draco like he had just murdered Hedwig.

At last, it seemed time for Draco to speak again. If he had gotten the worst out, the rest needed to be spoken too. "I was a Death Eater, and the Dark Lord gave me a mission. It was to kill Dumbledore."

Harry stared at him with his green eyes gone huge, unimpeded by his glasses. Draco must be a haze to him in the dim light, some distant impression of the boy he had thought he had

known.

"I tried, and I hurt people. I cursed Katie Bell. I poisoned Ron-"

"You what?" Harry said, form vibrating inside Draco's snake-like hold, but Draco still didn't let him go, selfishly enough. Harry felt too good and steadying beneath him. Merlin, how bad he wished he could be getting fucked by Harry instead of having this conversation.

"That was an accident," Draco said weakly. "I was coming up with ways to get Dumbledore. So I ended up with the idea how to get Death Eaters into Hogwarts."

"And it worked?" Harry said, gone very pale in his grasp.

"It worked," said Draco, in a small, wounded voice. "I'm sorry, Harry. I let Death Eaters into Hogwarts."

"No," Harry said like he kept saying, eyes fixed on Draco with some belief in them still lingering. "No, you wouldn't have done that. Not that. I know you, Draco Black-"

"But I wasn't Draco Black then," Draco said gently. "I was Draco Malfoy. I was a Malfoy, and I did my duty."

"Your duty?" Harry stared at him in paralyzed shock. "What does that mean?"

"I felt like it was my duty," Draco explained uncomfortably, "To do for my family. That's all I was thinking, then. I'm sorry."

"What- what happened to Professor Dumbledore?"

"Severus killed him," Draco said, and hastily added at Harry's thunderous gaze, "Dumbledore had wanted him to, he was dying anyway from some curse. And Severus had sworn an Unbreakable Vow to my mother to do it if I couldn't. And I couldn't. That's one thing I couldn't do, Harry, is kill Dumbledore, so that's why Severus had to do it for me."

"So Snape was working for the Dark Lord then too?" Harry said wonderingly.

"No," Draco said with a lump in his throat, "He was a spy. You cleared his name after you killed You-Know-Who."

"I killed You-Know-Who?" Harry said, light coming to his eyes for the first time in some time. "If this all is true... do you think that means I can do it again, this time? That I'm fated to come out as the victor?"

"I don't know," Draco said miserably. "I've changed so many things that happened. Sometimes I wish I had never gone back, but Harry, there's people I need to save, people who died in the blue loop..."

"Who?" Harry asked simply, green eyes as luminous as ever.

"Professor Burbage," Draco said, readying himself for the painful recital. "Mad-Eye Moody. Tonks. Her father Ted. Cedric. Fred. Sirius. Remus. Dobby-"

"That can't be," Harry said feverishly. "No, they can't die-"

"And Severus," Draco finished, rather numbly. "He died too."

And I've come back to make sure that doesn't happen again, whatever the cost. There was, it seemed, one bit he was still holding back from Harry after all.

"So you have to save them all," Harry breathed. "You believe that, that it's your responsibility? Even though you used to be..."

A Death Eater, yes, and I already wish I never told you that.

"The world is so different," Draco said with a weak shrug, focused with laser precision on Harry's gaze, for any signs of dismay or disgust. At least he didn't detect any disgust. "Some of them had already died, and now they're alive here. Some are protected by the existence of Xaphan- Xaphan wasn't a school or anything in the blue loop- and some will die in the Battle of Hogwarts, the final battle against You-Know-Who, if I can't stop it."

"The Battle of Hogwarts," Harry echoed. "Is that what's coming for us? And we win?"

"I hope we win," Draco sighed.

"We'll win," Harry said with false confidence. "We have to. There's no other choice." He shifted within Draco's hold, staring at him with this damned wounded look in his beautiful green eyes. "How many other secrets do you still have left to tell me?"

Just the one. And I never intend to tell you that, so that technically means... "None, Harry, I promise." Draco leaned forward to give Harry a kiss, and Harry let him, but he didn't kiss him back. Draco could imagine racing through Harry's brain, *He used to be a Death Eater used to be a Death Eater used to be a Death Eater...*

And then Harry kissed him back, hard enough to make Draco nearly fall off Harry's lap. "That had better be true." He drew Draco close to him, hands running through Draco's hair. "Because I- Draco, what you say you did in the past- I don't care. I really don't think I care."

"But Harry-" Draco began, feeling himself in an impossible dream. "Harry, didn't you listen- who I used to be- all the things I've done-"

"You said that's only in your memory now," Harry said softly. "Who you are today, that's who you are, isn't it?" Draco nodded shakily, hoping that was true.

"Draco Black, whoever you used to be, I love who you are now. I love you so much more than I could ever say. And if you used to be a Death Eater-" Harry lifted Draco's unblemished arm. "Right now you're not. And I need you. I can't lose you. I can't throw what we have away. Not again."

The Notebooks

Harry and Draco stayed up most of the night talking, so they ended up surprising the others by sleeping late into the day, despite Hermione's periodic attempts to rouse them.

"We've been experimenting with the Mirror of Ecidyrue, and nothing," she said earnestly.

"Don't do that," Draco advised sagely, before going back to sleep.

"I need to tell you all something," was Draco's first words to the group once he was done sleeping and eating. Harry gave a nod of approval and took a seat at Draco's side, entangling his fingers with Draco's in a way that seemed to state that whatever happened, Harry would be on his side. That was good. Draco needed that feeling.

The three seemed bemused to be arranged into an audience in one of L'Infern's barren parlors, Hermione and Ron leaning together and Luna seating herself right up front like a teacher's pet in class. "Something big to tell us, huh?" went Ron. "Hope it isn't that you're going to be admitting all that about the mirror and Dantanian Noir yesterday was a lie."

"I wish," Draco muttered, and Harry squeezed his hand. Hermione looked more alarmed, and raised a hand to quiet the others for Draco's revelation.

"Dantanian was in my wand," Draco began, "Keeping me from telling you all something. He would stop my tongue or anyone else's when we tried. And I think he kept anyone from seeing what I wrote in these notebooks." He reached under his chair to show his stash of black year notebooks, and Hermione immediately reached out. "I'll show you all what's in them now, you should be able to see. But not yet."

"So you've told Harry all of this?" Luna said, a hint of jealousy in her voice, and that was the last thing Draco needed to reckon with.

"He was the one there last night when I figured out I could tell," Draco said bluntly. "And he listened to me. For hours. So I need you all to listen to me now, however long it takes. The Mirror of Ecidyrue is what we thought it was, a mirror for time travel. It can take someone from their present and put them in their own body in their past."

"How would you know?" Ron asked skeptically. "You know someone who's time travelled with that thing, mate?"

"Yes," Draco said heavily. "Yes, I have."

Hermione's hands flew to her mouth. "Oh. Oh, no, it can't be."

The other two looked at her, while Harry winced. "What's wrong, Hermione?" Luna asked, and Hermione seemed close to trembling from the new piece of knowledge that had

presented itself to her brain.

"Draco," Hermione said slowly, "Please tell me you haven't gathered us to tell us that's you. That you went through that mirror, and went back in time."

"No way," said Ron breezily. "It's Draco, not You-Know-Who or something. There's no way Draco could have hidden something like that from us for so long-"

"I didn't want to," Draco said, voice cracking. "Dantanian made me. I would have told you the truth if I could, Ron. Hermione's right. It was me. I'm the one who's traveled through time. From when I was eighteen to when I was eleven. I went through the Mirror of Ecidyrue."

"No way," Ron breathed with a very different cadence, and Luna just looked adorably confused.

"I don't get it," Luna declared. "Why would you have done that?"

"I didn't know I was doing it, it was a mistake," Draco said, choosing not to add the part where he had been drunk. Grindelwald had been so overly amused by that, he wasn't about to give Ron a field day with it. "I know this is hard to grasp, but come on, we've been through stranger things, haven't we?"

"Have we, though?" went Ron.

"I'm not so sure," said Luna.

Only Hermione was willing to go along with all this. "Most times, people travel through time to change something," Hermione said quietly. "Draco, have you changed something?"

Draco went into the same explanation about the red line and blue loop that he had with Harry, though he could sense Ron and Luna didn't believe him. Hermione, for some reason, seemed to, and when Ron prodded at her for listening to her so intently, said with a flushed face, "Well, that would explain how he got so many OWLs."

"His OWLs?" Ron goggled. "He tells us he's been back in time and you're worried about losing to him at exams?"

"I'm sorry if it seems like cheating," Draco said weakly. "But yeah, I did take every class twice."

"I don't understand how no one would have noticed, though," Hermione said thoughtfully. "Your parents couldn't tell? Professor Snape couldn't?"

"We weren't close back then," Draco said uncomfortably. "Not when I was eleven. Not even me and Severus. We were never close in the blue loop, even though he was my godfather."

"Wait, if it happened when you were eighteen, then you should know things about the future," said Ron. "Did we manage to, you know, beat You-Know-Who?"

"Harry did. Harry killed him," Draco said, and although not fully convinced, Ron still crowed and gave Harry a high-five. "Your mother killed Bellatrix Lestrange," he added, wanting to make Ron keep smiling, despite how much somber news he would have to deliver soon.

"Holy shit!" Ron gasped. "Now I know you're having us all on!"

"No," Draco said with a tentative smile. "I'm not, I swear on Harry that I'm not. And Neville killed Nagini, the snake."

Ron simply refused to believe this, though Luna brightened up and became far more receptive to Draco's confession, as if hearing Neville did well in the blue loop was assurance he would survive the red line now. Ron demanded to know if he had personally done any heroic things in the Battle of Hogwarts, like his mother and Neville had, and Draco was forced to say, no, he didn't know of any.

"See!" Ron said triumphantly to Hermione. "He must be full of bull!"

"He's not, Ron," Hermione said, covering her face for a moment. "My God, it all makes sense. Everything makes sense now, Draco, about the way you were when I met you. The way you are." Then she looked up and her eyes focused keenly. "You didn't want to be friends with any of us in the start. Does that mean we weren't friends in the- what you call the blue loop?"

"No," Draco said, come to this part quicker than he might wish. "No, we weren't, Striker, I'm sorry. A lot was different. But I've tried to only change things for the better, when I was trying. For a while, I thought I should just make sure nothing changed, to make sure Harry still defeated You-Know-Who..."

"But you have changed things, and now that future isn't certain," Hermione said grimly. "Oh, Draco, you have to tell us *everything.* Don't you understand, if you've experienced the future, changes or not, there might be clues to the final Horcrux, or the Sword of Gryffindor, or how we're going to win the war?"

Draco's heart beat the faster. "I don't know that much about that, I'm sorry," Draco said, taking a deep breath, Harry's silent presence the only thing to steady him, "Because I wasn't on your side."

"You don't have to tell them this if you don't feel up to it, Draco," Harry said quietly, and Draco shook his head.

"You took it well. Maybe they'll take it well. Anyway, I was a Death Eater," Draco said breezily. "But that was the past, and we'll let bygones be bygones, won't we, so..."

"A Death Eater!" Ron cried out, seeming very much not able to breeze past this piece of information. "You? Like your parents, you mean?"

Luna frowned, clearly having the hardest time absorbing this different angle to her favorite cousin. "So we were Death Eaters?" She didn't look embarrassed at the four shocked looks

that greeted this declaration. "Well, surely if Draco was one, I would have joined him. I'm sorry, but I do think I would have."

"Luna," Draco said uncomfortably, "We weren't friends either, back in the blue loop. We didn't know each other. You were just a friend of Potter's. I barely knew your name."

"No," Luna said, tears coming to her eyes, "That can't be true. We're two halves of the same whole, aren't we? Wouldn't we always find each other?"

It took a lot of comforting Luna then to make her be alright about this. Their separation seemed to hit her harder than the news of Draco on the side of darkness, though Ron was shooting Draco some surreptitious looks when he didn't think Draco could catch them. Finally, Ron spoke, with Luna encased in Draco's apologetic arms.

"So, er, a Death Eater, then?" Ron said tepidly, and Draco just nodded.

"He's not like that anymore," Harry said loyally, ostentatiously taking Draco's hand in a demonstrative gesture for the others' benefit.

"You really wanted to eradicate Muggleborns from the wizarding world?" Hermione asked, and Draco could only keep nodding, the facts damning him by themselves. "But you- when you went back, you were different," she said quietly, as if trying to talk herself into being alright with this, the way Harry was casting the example for them.

"No one's fought harder for our side in the- the red line, or whatever it is, than Draco," Harry put in, and Ron seemed to take that in as a point.

"It might be easier if you all just let me tell the story, from beginning to end," Draco said, at last putting himself forward forcefully. "I guess it all begins with the day I met Harry Potter..."

Draco was provided with a throat-assisting potion at one juncture, which helped this mission of his. Luna broke away from him to let him sit snuggled up with Harry for the duration, though sometimes the way she stared down at her hands made Draco wish he'd stuck with her. He unfolded the story of the old world as best as he could, using his notebooks for reference before handing them over to the others.

That caused problems quickly, though, as Hermione wanted to know why she was only ever referred to as, *the Mudblood,* or *Potter's Mudblood.* Draco had no good answers for her.

He continued on, through his rivalry with Harry in first and second year, with calling Hermione a Mudblood, supporting the Heir of Slytherin (*It sounds like you were a right prick back then* was Ron's pithy assessment), to then the punch to the face Hermione had given him in third year, and Remus's exposure as a werewolf. "I don't know much of how it happened, I wasn't involved," Draco said with a shrug. "Remus and Sirius weren't exactly adopting me last time around, you know."

"So just me?" Harry said naively, and that was a whole new can of worms that, unfortunately, Draco had to unearth.

"Sirius's name was never cleared in the blue loop," Draco said heavily. "And he died at the Department of Mysteries, fighting the Death Eaters at the end of fifth year."

"No!" Luna cried out, and Hermione went to put an arm around her. Ron looked as if he could use some support very much himself, thank you very much.

"Remus didn't die until the Battle of Hogwarts," Draco said, and Hermione's lips turned to a thin line as more understanding flashed across her face.

"Your nine names," she said wonderingly. "That's why you're so intent on protecting us all from death, because some of those names did die, your first time."

"Yes," said Draco. "Yes, there's people who died that I can't let die this time around. But I have managed to save people. See, in fourth year, Harry didn't win the Triwizard Tournament. The cup was a Portkey, and he and Cedric Diggory touched it at the same time. They were both taken to the graveyard, and Peter Pettigrew killed Cedric."

"Well, it makes sense you'd save *Cedric's* life, you did always fancy him," Ron said with a nervous laugh, to which Harry predictably responded,

"No, he didn't," and at least that made Hermione and Luna laugh too.

"Who did you take to the Yule Ball?" Luna asked, as if this was prime sensitive information.

"Pansy Parkinson," Draco said, not without a sense of shame. "Anyway, I didn't do much fourth year myself. Fifth year, you lot had Dumbledore's Army, that's when you all met Luna when she joined up, I think, and you went to fight at the Ministry the same."

"And Sirius died," Harry filled in grimly.

"Sirius died. Bellatrix Lestrange killed him," Draco echoed, and at last they were come to the part he didn't want to remember. "The summer after fifth year, I became a Death Eater. My father had been arrested at the Ministry, so it was up to me to take on his place. And I did. It wasn't Theodore Nott to let Death Eaters into Hogwarts, it was me. And it was me- me who got Dumbledore killed." It was better to say a second time, after putting it past Harry and not being abjectly rejected as he might have feared. It still was hardly easy to get out.

"You let Death Eaters into Hogwarts?" Hermione echoed strangely, and Draco knew they had hit a sticking point for her.

"I was evil, then, Hermione," Draco said simply. "I don't have any excuse. You shouldn't make up any for me. Not about my family or anything. I had the choice, and I chose wrong. And now I was given a second chance to go back and make the right choices this time."

Hermione was quiet for the rest of Draco's explanation, though she began to pick at the notebooks more insistently. Ron picked up on her somber mood and followed suit, though Luna still had much to say as Draco chronicled his actions as a Death Eater in sixth and seventh year. Tears slipped from Hermione's eyes as Draco told them about having to torture

prisoners for Voldemort. It took him some time to realize tears were falling from his own eyes as well.

"I'm sorry," Draco said to Harry, feeling himself unworthy now of Harry's steady support. "I'm just so ashamed."

"Go on, Draco," Luna implored. "Tell us the rest."

"That's when we met, really, Luna," Draco said through blinked-back tears, forcing himself to keep speaking. "You were a prisoner at Malfoy Manor. I- I tried to help you, there, some."

"Did I survive the war?" Luna asked, which Draco supposed was truly the one logical question.

"Yes, you all did," Draco said, and steeled himself before delivering the blow. "But Tonks and Remus didn't, and Ron, I'm sorry, your brother Fred didn't."

"What?" Ron cried out, in a voice utterly unlike his own. "What do you mean, Fred died? Not Fred and George? Just Fred?"

"George lost an ear," Draco put in, as if that was about to make anyone laugh now.

"Fred can't die, it would shatter Mum," Ron stammered. "It would shatter *George*. I don't know how he'd live on without him."

"That's what I have to change," Draco said as firmly as he could, "And I'm here to change it. I *will* change it. Believe me when I say I won't stop at anything."

They had to stop for some time, then, as tears escaped from Ron's eyes too, in what seemed pure shock as well as grief. Hermione comforted him softly, wiping the tears from his cheeks, and Draco gazed at Harry wondering, *How did I get him on my side defending me still*?

"So," Draco said finally, when Ron told him to go on, "At one time, the three of you got caught and brought back to Malfoy Manor, and you escaped because Dobby helped you, but Dobby got killed by Bellatrix by the end of it. That's something else I intend to change. Dobby is going to live out this war.

"There was the Battle of Hogwarts, and I didn't take part in it much, except-" Draco took very deep breaths in anticipation of the anxiety-increasing memory he would have to unfold. "Vince and Greg and I tracked you three down before the battle. You were inside Hogwarts. You were in the Room of Requirement, I don't know why, and Vince cast Fiendfyre, but he couldn't control it, and it killed him. It nearly killed all of us. You- you saved me from it, Harry. Even though I was your enemy, you saved me."

"Why were we in the Room of Requirement?" Hermione asked, lifting her gaze. "At a time like that? Were we going out through the Hog's Head?"

"I think it seemed like you might have been looking for something."

"Draco," Hermione said, jumping up and seizing his arm, "Oh, Draco, I've realized something. I think we know something now. The last Horcrux, Draco. I think it must be at Hogwarts. And it must be inside the Room of Requirement."

"That's an awful leap," Ron said, seeming tired out from his tears, and Hermione shot him a look.

"What else would we have been looking for at a time like that? We must have had the same mission we have now: to destroy the Horcruxes. And we've already thought the last one might be at Hogwarts-"

"Which, if you're right, means we can't get to it," Harry finished unhappily, and Draco bit his lip.

"Maybe, do you think there might be some clue to where the Sword of Gryffindor could be? In my memories?"

"There's no telling until we check," Hermione said, and rolled up her sleeves. "Come on, it's time for research."

Draco ended up yielding up his notebooks to not just Hermione but all of them, as his past in the blue loop was turned unceremoniously into the form of another lead for their mission. There were worse ways his revelation could have been taken, he thought, although he still couldn't be sure what anyone but Harry really thought of it. At least they all seemed to believe it now.

Hermione became quickly obsessed with the notebooks, only leaving them to sleep or cook and eat. Her dedication to the notebooks knew no bounds, but she wasn't the only one fascinated by them, as invariably tidbits came out about the readers themselves, or things dear to them. Ron lifted his head once from the deadly sixth-year notebook to ask, "You poisoned me?" He turned the notebook over to Draco where the entry read, *Poisoned the weasel accidentally. Oops.*

"Accidentally!" Draco protested. "See, I was trying to kill *Dumbledore*..."

"Oh, well that makes it all better," Ron groused, but proved willing to let bygones be bygones.

Harry was not quite so swift to forget when Ron uncovered a certain choice piece of information from the sixth notebook. "You were sleeping with Theodore Nott?" Ron said, wrinkling his nose. "Were you involved with him?"

"Give me that," Draco said, but a wide-eyed Harry grabbed it first.

"'New Year's Eve at the Nott's. Theo fucks me senseless half a dozen times before letting me know we're through.' Yes, I'd say it sounds like they were involved," Harry said indignantly.

"Oh, Draco, you and Theo?" Luna perked up from where she had the second book. "That must have made it quite difficult to... well, you know..." *Kill him,* Draco finished mentally for her.

"Harry, don't be mad about Theo, it's just a memory," Draco tried, but Harry looked less likely to just let this go than he had Draco's announcement he used to be a Death Eater.

"Harry, it's not real outside his memories," Hermione counseled, but Harry ignored her.

"Were you in love with him?" Harry said in a small, hurt voice, jealousy irrational as ever.

"No!" Draco said immediately, and received skeptical looks from the force of his denial. "At least- I don't know. It wasn't- romantic like that, it was just sex, Harry, don't freak out. You're the only one I love now." Harry did indeed look liable to freak out. "Hey, you know what I-did to him, this time around. Don't you think the time to be jealous about me and Theodore Nott has finally come to a close?"

Harry gave him a wordless disturbed look at that, and Draco thought he would be ready to abandon the topic, but there was no such luck. "Except, see, Draco-"

"What about you? You were in love with Ginny Weasley!" Draco countered, and frowned at Harry's surprised look. "What, did you miss all those references to you and Girl Weasel?"

"Me and Ginny?" Harry said, focus switching from Theo to himself with the force of utter bafflement. "That's impossible. She's like a sister to me."

"Not in the blue loop," Draco said tightly, trying to hold back the force of his own jealousy.

"What about Millicent Bulstrode?" Harry asked, still sounding like he scarcely believed Draco, and Draco scoffed at him.

"They didn't even know each other then," Draco said, "And you and Ginny were all over each other, all the time, you were so in love it was sickening..."

"Draco, remember all that is only in *your* memory," Hermione reminded him, and Draco fell silent lest he seem jealous.

"Me and Ginny," Harry said with a shake of his head. "Who would have thought it. But Draco, that still doesn't mean you and Theo weren't..."

"Argh!" exclaimed Hermione, as her friends seemed liable to go around and around with no end to the discussion.

Ron was flabbergasted by Luna's announcement that Ron had broken his wand in second year, and managed to make it backfire so badly he cursed himself with vomiting slugs. "Why are you grinning?" Ron demanded after Luna recounted the event, seeing Draco struggle to contain his mirth at the memory.

"You don't understand," Draco said, biting his tongue hard to keep the giggles back. "That was one of my fondest memories."

Ron looked mystified, and a little hurt. "You really hated me that much?"

Draco thought Ron was failing to appreciate the inherit hilarity of someone cursing themselves to spew slugs, but he tried to take Ron's inquiry as seriously as it deserved. "Yes, I suppose I did." At Ron's gobsmacked look, Draco sighed and reflected, "Our fathers were always rivals. It started there. When you think about it, you and I were destined to hate each other, weren't we?"

Ron now was the one to look troubled, but not say anything more to argue the point.

Luna, for her part, was disturbed to find that it had been Ginny Weasley, not her, in the Chamber of Secrets. Draco hoped she didn't blame him too much for that inadvertent change. Maybe she was just wondering how different as a person she would have been if everything with Tom Riddle would never have happened to her.

But outwardly, what it seemed Luna couldn't get over what Hermione found in the fifth book, about how Draco had worked for Umbridge, to the point of helping her bust Dumbledore's Army and shut it down. Draco could only offer meager excuses for his conduct- *Well, she was high up at the Ministry, and my father always wanted me to make connections*- but Luna had a short and sweet rebuttal to that. "But Umbridge? She was evil!"

Draco shifted uncomfortably under all their gazes then. "Well, I guess I was kind of evil back then too."

"Makes sense why I couldn't stand you back then," said Ron, who still seemed to be grappling with the notion of him and Draco having been such unshakable enemies. Draco could only heartily endorse Ron's notion.

"Believe me, I can't stand who I was back then either."

"You can't be too harsh on yourself," Hermione cut in thoughtfully. "Draco, it's clear you were a product of your environment and upbringing, as much as anything else-"

"Hermione," Draco interrupted heavily, "I was evil."

Harry came up with a different target of recrimination: himself. "What does this mean?" he said, having gotten the sixth book, largely, Draco suspected to scrutinize it for hints about Draco and Theo. He held up the page there marked *Potter nearly kills me, Severus saves me, Potter gets detention.* "What did I do to you?" Perhaps he was hoping Draco was merely being hyperbolic there.

"You know that cutting curse I use, Sectumsempra?"

"The one I'm forbidden to use," Luna said sulkily, "Because it's the one you kill with."

"Yeah, that's the one," Draco said with a forced laugh, trying to drive away the memory of lying on that bathroom floor thinking he was already dead. "Sectumsempra, Harry. That's what you cast on me."

"What?" Harry exploded, seeming not to believe his ears. "How could I have done that? Was I trying to kill you?"

"We were dueling at the time," Draco said, with the unfamiliar feeling of trying to make excuses for Harry Potter. "And I was about to cast the Cruciatus curse on you-"

"That doesn't justify attempted murder!" Hermione said heatedly. "Oh, Harry, what could you have been thinking?" She seemed so caught up in the horror of it, she'd forgotten her own dictum that they couldn't be blamed too much for what had happened in the blue loop.

"I don't think he knew what it would do," Draco said, but that recklessness seemed to make it sound all the more damnable to Harry.

"Hermione's right, there's no excuse," Harry said miserably. "Why didn't you tell me this sooner? You went through all the bad things *you've* done. God, I almost killed you. My dragon."

Draco went over to try to comfort Harry physically, since verbally wasn't working out so well. "You aren't accountable for what that other version of you did," Draco sighed, taking Harry's arm. "You can't be so hard on yourself. I know the real you would never, ever hurt me."

"How can you be so sure after that?" Harry asked, submitting to Draco's touch but not seeming changed by it. "How could you ever trust me again? How do you trust me now?"

Draco didn't have any good answer for that, but he tried. "Harry, you know you spoke for me at my trial and kept me out of Azkaban, much as I probably deserved it. You've saved my life how many times? And you've made me happier than-"

Harry cut off Draco's impending sappiness, but with words Draco didn't want to hear. "I can't believe I was capable of that. I'll never forgive myself for hurting you that way."

"Maybe," Ron suggested, "When Draco talks about how lucky he's been to have our friendship and how it's changed him, you know, maybe it goes both ways. Harry, you might be a better person for having known Draco, too..."

Harry hardly seemed to be listening. "I need to go," he said, and walked out by himself into the snow.

Draco gave Harry a minute before going after him. He found Harry in the largest courtyard, hands clenched to fists, staring up at the sky. It was snowing softly, as it so often did at L'Infern. Harry tensed and stopped walking when he saw Draco, but he didn't say a word.

"Harry," Draco said gently, "If you're going to forgive me for all the things I did as a Death Eater, you're going to have to forgive yourself for something you weren't even the one to really do."

Harry let Draco take his hand, but his face still looked shadowed. "I can't stop picturing it now. You with all those cuts, bleeding out."

Draco forced back a shudder at the reminder and tried for levity. "It wasn't that bad, Harry. It didn't even scar!" Except he had been going to try for honesty now. "Well, not much. Barely. Just these thin silver scars that don't count-"

"I did scar you, though," was all Harry seemed to hear from that, turning his cold hand in Draco's grasp to entwine their fingers together. "You must have hated that."

Not as much as I hated the Dark Mark. Talk about an aesthetic nightmare. "Oh, I don't know. It wasn't so bad in the end, having your marks on me."

"Did you-" Harry took a deep breath, somehow looking still more guilty. "Did you already like me back then?"

"Amortentia smelled like you," Draco admitted, feeling a rush, because it felt good to lay it all out for Harry, give everything over to the boy he trusted more than anyone.

The natural response then could have been Harry saying, *Well, I liked Ginny back then according to you,* and maybe some rejoinder about Draco's past with Theo if he felt like it. But Harry just stayed quiet and let Draco hold his hand in the snow.

They readied for their scheduled weekly contact with Sirius and Remus without any surety as to what to say. Draco didn't know if he wanted to explain to them what he'd wreaked upon the world in the person of Dantanian, let alone all these new things about him that the other four had found out. He supposed he would be bound to tell Sirius and Remus someday, maybe soon, about who he really was, and see how they felt about having adopted him then.

Harry suggested it would be best to avoid mention of Dantanian or the blue loop, and the others agreed, leaving Harry and Draco to speak to Sirius and Remus from inside the tent. They cramped into it feeling constrained after their time in their lavish bedroom together here at L'Infern, but Draco did have a number of fond memories with Harry in this tent. He shot Harry a roguish smile at them, which was tentatively returned with a hand on Draco's, before the two-way mirror came to life and they were staring into the faces of Sirius and Remus. Sirius looked tired and flushed, as if he'd just run there, but he and Remus were also holding hands. There was a look on both of their faces like something was very wrong.

"Draco, it's good you're here," Remus said quickly, somehow bypassing Harry when he was usually the paragon of politeness. "We need to talk to you right away." Then he seemed to notice the boy clinging to Draco's hand. "Oh, hello, Harry. This is some... personal news for Draco. Draco, would you prefer if Harry waited outside?"

"No way," Draco said firmly. "Whatever you can say to me, you can say to Harry, you know that." He was pretty confident this was about the Order having found the site of Malfoy Manor destroyed, and maybe even located some of the bodies. That wasn't exactly upsetting, except for how much he might have to rethink telling about Dantanian. Did the Order deserve to know as bloody a wizard as Dantanian, arguably a Dark Lord, was on the loose? Did they deserve to know how much it was Draco's fault?

"Okay, Draco," Sirius said, taking a deep breath, and exchanging looks with Remus before continuing. "Draco, it's about your mother."

"What?" Draco cried out, rather more loudly than he should have, but he was worried Dantanian may have tracked her down and gotten his hands on her despite his promise to Draco. If Dantanian had really killed her after all, then...

Then what? What could Draco or anyone do in the face of a threat like Dantanian?

"She's in our custody right now," Remus said, and then, seeing the look on Draco's face, quickly added, "She's not dead, Draco, don't worry. She's come to the Order of the Phoenix for asylum."

Narcissa's Tale

Draco expected Mother to be at Xaphan already, but it turned out she was at one of the Order safe houses, guarded by Moody, Shacklebolt, and the Longbottoms. Draco tried not to look the Longbottoms in the eye, at the reminder they were providing shelter for one of his family, when he had recently lost them one of theirs.

He found Mother where they had her in the bedroom, with her blonde hair all wild and askew, still dressed in her soot-stained nightdress with someone else's robe thrown over it for warmth. She was wearing someone else's shoes as well, which were slightly oversized on her feet. Draco wondered where she had gone off to after Dantanian had threatened her, before she considered her options and realized her only real one was Xaphan.

They let Draco in to speak to his mother without much fanfare, though Moody did hiss at him to be vigilant. Draco kindly took that under advisement, then found himself alone in a room with his mother for the first time in years. "Muffliato," he cast quickly, and damn the Order if they were suspicious at that. There were some things Draco and his mother might have to say that would be for their ears alone.

"Draco," Mother said, relief etched across her face at the sight of her son. "I knew you'd come."

"Counting on me to bail you out?" Draco said caustically, which was not exactly the note he had intended to start this on. He had meant to be wise and removed, but he found that impossible when faced with his Death Eater mother, and the physical evidence of that pregnancy that implored assistance for her even if nothing else did. "Did you really think it wise to count on my mercy?" He had tortured her, after all, on the library tower, casting Cauterizo on her still-branded hand. He doubted she could soon forget that.

Mother pursed her lips, regarding him more warily. She folded her hands together over her pregnant stomach. "I expected you to show mercy for your unborn sister, at least."

Draco's mouth went dry. "A sister?" he said, and it was all suddenly real to him. "Father must be upset. He'd have wanted a boy for an heir. I bet he's seething-"

"Draco," Mother said, pained, "You know full well your father is dead."

Unspoken was however much she held that to be Draco's fault.

Draco had actually forgotten, for that moment. "Are you in mourning?"

Mother's face twisted. "How can you ask me that?"

Draco took that as a yes. He thought Mother was taking an awful high tone with him, though, considering their respective circumstances. "I'll ask you whatever I like. It's my side you've gone to for refuge, not Father's. It's my assessment the Order of the Phoenix will listen to, whether I plead for you or not."

"They wouldn't just leave me to the Dark Lord," Mother said, and looked disquieted when Draco didn't immediately agree with her. "I know they wouldn't. Not with this." She looked down at her hands over her stomach. "Whatever I have done, this child is innocent."

"'Whatever you have done?' Mother, you're a Death Eater," Draco said, not as harshly as he might have, if he hadn't recently discussed so many memories where he had been the one wearing that awful mark. "You know they're going to call you to account for all the times you've contributed to the Dark Lord's cause against us."

Mother looked nervous but stubborn, and fixed on the idea she had given herself over to. "They will have to grant me asylum."

Mother was taken to Xaphan blindfolded, not for formal asylum but for the most formidable protection possible while the Order deliberated. Somehow, the news of Mother's arrival seemed to have gotten out amongst the Order and even the students, as they all lined the pathway up from the beach where Draco and the Order guards had Apparated up with her. There was no rowdiness, though, no anger the likes of which Draco might have expected, but simple stares, quiet and yet so numerous they felt deafening. For her part, Mother seemed to feel them as she painfully climbed the path upwards.

She stumbled sometimes like it was a penitential walk, the contrast between her pregnant stomach and her blindfold a terrible one to behold. Her tangled blonde hair stirred in the wind from the sea, whipping around her blindfolded face as if to punish her. Draco's heart ached to think of such a proud woman being so exhibited to her enemies. At least she didn't have to stare back at all of those gaping pairs of eyes.

"Is there someone there?" she asked, and Draco didn't answer her, just took her hand and helped her over the stones in the path. He wondered what genius had decided for them to Apparate *here*, instead of right into the dungeons or something, except maybe the promised Anti-Apparition wards for Xaphan were getting into shape.

In any event, he had the uncomfortable feeling of being scrutinized by dozens and dozens of people silently, which made him wonder how much they saw him and his mother as a unit. How linked they felt Draco Black was to the new Death Eater within their midst. It might have been opportune if Draco himself knew the answer to that question.

Severus was waiting at the top of the path, flanked by Remus and Sirius, with a somber air to proceedings there as well, like this had all been an unplanned funeral procession. Their steps *had* taken them somewhat near Dumbledore's tomb.

"Narcissa," Severus said, and she reacted powerfully to the familiar voice, seeming to brighten under her blindfold.

"Severus? Severus, is that you?"

"Come with us, Narcissa," Severus ordered, and took Mother's arm from Draco to lead her into the dungeon entrance and downwards.

They established Mother in as much comfort as possible for a jail cell, Gilderoy magically lugging down comfortable pieces of furniture from unused rooms in Slytherin, and Severus bestowing her with dark drapes everywhere that made the place look like more of a home. House elves popped by to drop off some clean changes of clothes for her, and piping hot food, far better than she would have been able to get on the run.

When Mother finally got her blindfold taken off, she seemed pleased by the accommodations, despite the luxury she was used to at Malfoy Manor. Perhaps she was gratified to see they had done more than the bare minimum for her. In her mind, that must bode well for her appeal to the Order.

"Draco," Mother said in a low voice, catching him as he began to leave the cell, "You must come and see me again as soon as you can." Draco wasn't sure he wanted to, but he found himself nodding like a dutiful son, for his mother by blood, before joining his adoptive parents on the way back up out of the dungeons.

He could have gone to Remus and Sirius then and there, told them the truth about himself and the blue loop, but he found he lacked the will, to tell them or Severus. Maybe he'd do it tomorrow. Or maybe he wouldn't.

His room at Xaphan was lonely without Harry, but he made do. The difficulty was not the empty bed but the racing thoughts that came with it, scrutinizing every word he had spoken to his mother and everything she had said back. In her presence, he felt somehow like a child again, with the underlying sense always there that he had betrayed her, and she of course knew it.

He'd betrayed her in nearly every possible way a child could betray their parent. Save when he'd interfered with Dantanian's deadly mission, and perhaps from there came her almost irrationally fixed expectation of his help. Maybe she thought if he wouldn't leave her to Dantanian, he wouldn't leave her to Voldemort also.

And of course Draco *couldn't* leave her to Voldemort. He would have to speak for her, he had known that all along, difficult as it was to look into her eyes and not feel a neglected anger of his own towards her. He wasn't exactly happy with the side she had chosen either. Except maybe he should have worked harder, or at least worked at all, to try and give her a chance to come over to the Order with him, before it was too late...

What it all came down to in the end was that both his parents had survived the blue loop. He couldn't let it be *neither* to survive the red line. There was a limit to how many, innocents or not, should be placed upon the sacrificial altar of Draco's second chance.

The next day, Draco was with Mother again as she was taken to a meeting of all the Order present on Xaphan, and some who seemed to have come to Xaphan for the grave occasion. It looked like a reconvening of the crowd for Bill and Fleur's wedding. There was Shacklebolt, Moody, the Longbottoms, the Weasleys, Sirius and Remus, Severus, Dedalus Diggle, Hestia

Jones, Arabella Figg, McGonagall, Mundungus Fletcher, and the list ranged on, all looking eager to hear from such an important captive from the other side.

Junior members were present too, like Tonks and Cedric, flanked by Bill and Charlie Weasley, who looked nervous but excited to be allowed to be part of this. Draco almost hated them for that enthusiasm. This was not going to be some bloody vaudeville show. This was the parading of Draco's mother before her enemies, and some part of Draco resented the insult that posed to his old family.

When they let Draco take the blindfold off Mother, she blinked hard at so many enemy faces assembled before her, trying and mostly managing to conceal her fear for them. Her gaze focused, though, on Tonks, who rose to see her properly as soon as she was brought in.

"Nymphadora," Mother said wonderingly. "You're pregnant." Cedric put a protective arm around his now-wife as she was addressed by their captive.

"So are you," Tonks said, in a far more chilling tone, and Mother wilted, sensing another connection was foreclosed.

"Order, order," Moody croaked as their leader, able to give the orders now even with McGonagall in the room. "We have here Narcissa Malfoy, Death Eater, come to Xaphan to appeal for asylum against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named." It seemed even the hardened Moody refused to say Voldemort's name now that the Taboo was enacted around the country. No doubt it reached even to Xaphan. "Narcissa Malfoy, now is your chance to speak for yourself and explain why you desire asylum."

"If I'm left on my own," Mother said quickly, "Death Eaters will hunt me down and have me killed. They'll take me to Hogwarts to the Dark Lord himself and make sure I suffer enough before my life is ended."

Murmurs spread through the room, murmurs Draco hated. He wondered how it could possibly not seem as straightforward to the others as it did to him. "Narcissa Malfoy," Draco said, raising his voice over the others, "Was part of a splinter group of Death Eaters led by Bellatrix Lestrange, that left You-Know-Who soon after his arrival to Hogwarts and established themselves independently at Malfoy Manor."

"Let your mother talk, boy," Moody said gruffly. "You're not saying anything we don't know, besides. Tell us the story from the beginning, woman. Tell us how you and your vile sister came to leave the side of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

"It came down to Dumbledore's wand," Narcissa said nervously, gaze darting nervously around to evaluate the faces that stared her down. "Bella killed Dumbledore-"

She was broken off by a roar of grief from many of the inhabitants of the room, many of whom it seemed had not known or been sure of that fact.

"So it was Bellatrix Lestrange," Diddle said, outraged. "What a way for that legendary man to go, at her odious hands!"

Mother's mouth set. "Bella paid for what she did, believe me."

This was rapidly degenerating. The last thing they needed was for Mother to come off as defensive of Bellatrix Lestrange. Draco cast a pleading glance towards Severus. He noticed Gilderoy was not there as an audience- he did happen to also be their technical prisoner, as Draco sometimes forgot- but Draco was sure Severus would tell him everything later tonight.

And Severus did not disappoint Draco now, cutting through the mourning with his low, silky voice. "Tell us, then, Narcissa, how your sister paid for the murder of Albus Dumbledore."

"She lost the favor of the Dark Lord," Mother said, which from the small tittering that provoked did not seem a terrible price to most of the Order. Mother glanced around wildly, looking hunted at the sound, her hands both going to wrap around her stomach protectively. "The Dark Lord wanted the wand of Dumbledore for himself to use-"

"Why not just use his old wand?" Remus asked keenly. "Was something wrong with his own?"

Draco had never thought about that, just assuming the power of the Elder wand and its reputation were too strong for Voldemort to resist. It was a good question. "I don't know," was all Mother could say to it, earning scowls as if she was being willfully disappointing.

"I don't know," she insisted again. "I just know he took it from her quickly, and he wasn't satisfied. The wand remained loyal to Bella. When the Dark Lord at last took her aside and tried to torture her for her failure, it rebounded upon the Dark Lord. I only know of that from what Bella told me. She said she took the wand back and ran."

"And here we had heard Bella was so fond of You-Know-Who," Sirius jibed, earning a warning glare from Remus, but Mother took his inquiry seriously.

"She wanted to live, though," Mother said fretfully, "At least that's how I understood it. She came to me and the rest of our family and said we had to flee Hogwarts if any of us wanted to live, so we followed her."

McGonagall frowned. "Your family being-"

"My husband, Lucius Malfoy, her husband, Rodolphus Lestrange, and his brother, Rabastan Lestrange." Mother managed to speak the names without her voice wavering, impressively enough, though Draco could tell from her earlier sensitivity about mention of Father that she was indeed in mourning. "We went to Malfoy Manor, and we expected Death Eaters to go after us, but they didn't. Bella said she thought they were afraid of her wand. And we were safe behind the wards of the manor. We rarely left the place-"

"Except you did," Sirius said, voice carrying forward loud and damning, "When you ambushed Harry Potter and his friends, including your own son." The sober faces on the Order made it clear this much news had spread around, since Harry had told Sirius at Christmas. "You left Malfoy Manor then."

Draco wished he could cast a warning glance at his mother without the entire hall seeing. He could feel himself suddenly on the brink of exposure, as Remus asked, "How did you find Harry and the others?"

"There was a knife in Draco's possession," Mother said evenly, "A knife Bella had a spell on to track," and as she did her and Draco's eyes met. There in the history of that knife lay the story of Draco's murder of Theo, which none there but Mother knew. Whether she would be merciful and hold back, if she indeed realized it was a secret, was yet to be seen.

"How did she place a tracking spell on Mr. Malfoy's possession?" McGonagall asked, and Draco waited with bated breath to see what his fate would be.

Mother seemed to sense the gravity of the moment, because she stole another small glance at Draco before saying, "I don't know."

So Draco was freed of a sudden tribunal of his own, to reckon with the murder he had committed in the Chamber of Secrets. The lie also left him beholden to his mother, though, which he didn't like either. She could hold that over his head, pathetic and powerless as she seemed, that Draco had killed Theodore Nott and she could tell her captors at any time she wanted.

A small explosion of frustration followed her disavowal. "For someone seeking asylum," Moody called viciously, "There is a great deal you claim *not to know*!"

"I'm sorry," Mother said, bowing her head, no doubt trying to look the picture of the beleaguered victim. "There was many things Bella never told me, especially after I became pregnant. She didn't think I was strong enough to handle business like her."

"And she was right, for you to come to us," Sirius sneered at his cousin. "Or was she? Tell me, Narcissa, why have you left the side of your sister to come to us? Is it to trick us? To find a way into Xaphan, to earn Bella a reprieve from the Dark Lord?"

"No!" Mother protested. "Surely you must know- my sister Bella is dead."

The eruption then was too much for even Severus to contain. He did shoot a troubled, perhaps knowing look at Draco upon seeing Draco's lack of surprise. Half the story seemed written for him already by that reaction, and damn, it would be nice to have Gilderoy here, if only to distract Severus a little from the matter at hand.

"Bella dead?" Sirius cried out. "Remus, is it possible? Can we really be so lucky?"

"Tell us, Narcissa," Remus ordered, "When and how your sister died."

And here was a story that perhaps could not exclude Draco, much as Draco wished it could. He hoped the members of the Order wouldn't be too mad at him for not having told them before this meeting, but it honestly seemed so incredible he doubted many of them would have believed just him.

"It was only days ago," Mother said solemnly, "At Malfoy Manor."

"You said the wards kept you safe," Shacklebolt said cannily, and Mother shook her head.

"Not from dragonfire."

She earned a wave of surprise, but very little visible belief. "Dragonfire," Charlie Weasley said, the expert at hand leaning forward skeptically. "Dragons are not weapons of war. Very few breeds attack humans unless provoked. What do you mean, your wards were brought down by dragonfire?"

Mother shot Draco an apologetic glance, but it seemed inevitable that it come out then. "Draco was there. He can tell you, there was a dragon that attacked the Manor and killed everyone there but him and me."

"Draco," Remus said in a strange tone, "Were you at Malfoy Manor, the day that Lucius Malfoy and the Lestranges died?" Draco nodded with a feeling like he was caught in a web of his own making. "Did you witness their deaths?" Draco nodded again. "But what is this about a dragon?"

Draco didn't even know where to start. What was he supposed to do, try and explain the history and connection to him of Dantanian Noir, only to claim he'd brought Dantanian back to life with a mysterious mirror, for Dantanian then to become a dragon? Holding back the truth seemed the safer option, much as he despised it in himself. He had the sinking feeling he'd be meeting privately with Severus later to have the real truth dragged out of him.

"I went to Malfoy Manor by myself to kill Bellatrix Lestrange. But there was a dragon there. I don't know why. And the dragon attacked the manor. It burned it down and killed everyone but Mother. I got Mother to safety myself while she was unconscious."

"And you were planning to tell all this to the Order when?" Cedric asked caustically, looking disbelieving and judgmental already, before holding up an apologetic hand to the Orders' senior members for speaking out of turn.

"It was only days ago, and I was away," Draco said, trying his best to seem full of integrity. "So I'm here now, and I'm telling you all now."

"There was a man there when I awoke," Mother chimed in, despite Draco's open death glare. "Young and long-haired. He wanted to kill me, but Draco stopped him, and told me to run. So I Apparated away. And I had nowhere to go, so when I could find the courage, I went to find an Order safe house to turn myself in."

A long silence greeted the end of the recitation of Mother's narrative. "You did not know this man?" Severus finally broke the silence, and Mother shook her head.

"Perhaps he was the master of the dragon," she said fearfully. "But by the time I awoke after the dragon's attack, the dragon was gone."

Draco got the feeling the Order was definitely not happy with him as the meeting concluded. He received many questions about the dragon and the mysterious man which seemed to suspect Draco was holding something back, if not having entirely recited a ridiculous falsehood he and his mother had concocted in secret. It was no surprise, then, that the Order suggested they take a heavily-armed trip to the site of the Malfoy Manor massacre tomorrow. At least Draco found himself invited.

He would have to be, in case Dantanian was the type to return to the scene of the crime. His lack of awareness where Dantanian could be, save "trying to fix the mirror," was maddening.

He also found himself scooped up by Severus after the meeting, with looks exchanged between him and Sirius and Remus that suggested his guardians approved of this harsh avenue of questioning. Severus led him down to his chambers, where Gilderoy waited anxiously, pacing the floor. "How was the meeting-" Gilderoy began, only to break off at Severus's look.

Draco expected Severus to just bark, "Out!" and send Gilderoy away with his tail between his legs, but his godfather was kinder than that. "Gilderoy," Severus said, almost gently, "I need to speak to my godson. Might you grant us some time alone?"

"Of course," Gilderoy said, casting a nervous glance between Severus and Draco as if wondering what Draco might be in for. "Draco, always a pleasure to see you back here..." He gave Draco a quick fugitive hug before racing out of Severus's rooms.

"So," Severus said smoothly as soon as they were alone, "How much of that story of you and your mother's is true, and how much vital information are you holding back from the Order of the Phoenix?"

"Wow," Draco said, trying for levity. "Won't you even offer me a cup of tea before you call me a liar?"

"No," Severus intoned. "No, I will not offer you tea."

Draco barked out a fitful laugh at that. "Suppose that's what I could expect... Severus," he said, resistance dropping immediately, "I would have told the whole truth, but no one would have believed me."

"A likely story," Severus said wanly, sitting Draco in his most comfortable green armchair as he began to pace the dark stone floors himself, full of excess energy. Maybe Gilderoy would be back later to help take care of that problem for him. "Tell me, then, what is so unbelievable. Apart from the fact that you claimed you went to Malfoy Manor to face your family *alone.* Mr. Potter would never have allowed such risk to your person-"

Draco played with his HJP necklace. "He didn't know, I snuck out," said Draco, and Severus heaved a sigh.

"Might you recall, my superlatively idiotic godson, a certain piece of advice I bestowed upon you as you were leaving Xaphan-"

"I remember. 'Don't be overconfident,'" Draco said with a weak grin. "Well, you were right, Severus. I did learn you were right."

Severus took the tale of the three mirrors and Dantanian's return to life about as well as Draco could have hoped. He was skeptical, but did seem to believe Draco was telling the truth as he knew it.

"It is indeed important that you be honest with us," Severus concluded, "If Dantanian Noir is truly on the loose again, and capable of becoming a dragon at will, as against the laws of magic as that may be. Dantanian may become as formidable an enemy in time as the Dark Lord."

"Really? Dantanian?" Draco hedged, and Severus gave him one of his more judgmental looks.

"He spared your mother at your behest," Severus said dryly. "Very well. We shall stake the future of the wizarding world upon this Dark Lord's weakness for Draco Black. A risk well worth taking."

"I don't know what we can do about it, though," Draco sighed. "No one knows where he is..."

"And I certainly hope you will be too busy with this mysterious mission of Dumbledore's to do anything so foolhardy as to *consider* searching for him," Severus cut in sagely. "No more risks like the one you took assaulting Malfoy Manor on your lonesome, Draco. As your godfather, I forbid it."

"I won't," Draco said in a smaller voice. "Believe me, I won't. Nothing like that ever again."

"Oh, no," Severus heaved a sigh, ever-burdened by his godson, and eyed him with ire. "You seem to have been traumatized by your ordeal at Malfoy Manor. Shall we engage the Mind Healers at once?"

So Draco had been given the perfect opportunity to tell about the blue loop, and hadn't told. Maybe it was destined to just be Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Luna to know, until the Orphean Bargain took Draco out of the equation.

"No," Draco said, trying to act blasé and cool about it, an act he soon ruined by wheedling, "Except, maybe if I could have some more draught of peace, that would be helpful..."

With a sigh like never in history had anyone ever been so burdened, Severus hunted down and delivered a new supply of top-rate draughts of peace to his godson.

The trip to the manor the next morning was a popular one, between the guard to keep Mother both safe and confined, and the number more of individuals curious to see what had become of the once magnificent Malfoy Manor. Draco found himself oddly self-conscious about the state of the place, like some reflection upon his family, even if it was a family he no longer

called his own. But he was starting to learn from being near Mother again, perhaps detaching himself from those ties had not been so easy nor complete as he had once thought.

Draco enjoyed the sounds of utter shock and dismay at the state of the place, until he realized his mother was just as stricken by returning to the place. Then he realized his mother was not stricken by trauma, but rather by the sight of a half dozen Death Eaters at the edge of the property, looking to be inspecting the place for answers much as the Order was. Better a few Death Eaters than one Dantanian. Sirius called out the Death Eaters' presence and whipped a curse at the party of them as soon as they were seen.

Draco, for his part, did not go chasing after danger for once, but fell in right beside his mother, ready to defend her against anyone who breached their perimeter. But it was not much of a fight to fear, the Death Eaters quickly realizing themselves vastly outnumbered. Without the anti-Apparition wards, their enemies could merely spirit themselves away out of their clutches. In his heart, Draco was relieved. He wouldn't have looked forward to another full-tilt battle with his mother present.

McGonagall led the way picking over the old place, where the traces of what remained of the Lestranges and Father were now so intermixed with the rest of the rubble as to be indistinguishable. But they had Draco's solemn word he had witnessed those deaths, if not the knowledge only Severus had- and perhaps Sirius and Remus, if he'd shared- that Draco had borne that witness from atop the dragon. Yes, Draco could firmly promise to the gathered Order members, all ears, Bellatrix Lestrange had indeed died here.

Charlie Weasley was the one most shocked, at the devastation a dragon had wrought, going against everything he knew about the beasts in his training. Draco would have tried to comfort him if not for his need to stay stalwartly by Mother's side, anticipating somehow the possibility of friendly fire as well as enemy attempts upon her life. When one wore that hideous mark on one's arm, attack from any side was possible.

He was glad to leave when they finally did, feeling the ghost of Dantanian somehow lingering over those barren piles of rock and ash where somewhere faded blood and guts intermingled, the aftertaste of overwhelming smoke returning to his lungs. He escorted Mother back to her "chambers," as he instinctively called it, though it was obvious it was just a rather nice cell.

"Wait, Draco," Mother said once he made to go. "I need to speak with you again, I've told you."

Draco's stomach flipped. "Muffliato," he cast by way of an answer, and Mother leaned forward in her armchair, cradling her stomach tiredly after their expedition. "Is this about Theo?"

"Bella thought you had killed Theodore Nott," Mother said softly. "It's true, isn't it? I could see it in your face when we got to that part of the tale."

"And what, this is blackmail?" Draco quickly exploded. "You'll tell them all if I don't do as you say and get you whatever the fuck it is you want?"

Mother leaned away, looking taken aback. "No, Draco. I will keep your secret. You saved me from that long-haired man at the manor, and I am in your debt. Not to mention, I am still your mother-"

"Are you?" Draco said tightly. "I mean, really, after everything, are you?"

A wondrous look came over Mother's face, something between guilt and faith. "I hope I am."

"You let Death Eaters into Xaphan," Draco blurted. "At Sirius and Remus's wedding. They couldn't have done it without your connection to the place. You cast Piertotum Locomotor and set the gargoyles on all of us, and you let in Father and he took Harry- Harry could have been killed, all because of you-"

"Draco," she said gravely, "I told you then, as I will tell you now, my mission was to get to you to speak to you of your wand. I wanted to save you."

"By ruining everything I cared about?" Draco said in disbelief. "And you took part in the assault on Hogwarts, didn't you? And the ambush outside the moonstone cache. And when I came to Malfoy Manor, you were there ready to fight me. Admit it, Mother, you're a Death Eater, and I'm part of the Order of the Phoenix. We're enemies now, and that's all there is to it. You would have killed me any of those times given the chance-"

"I wouldn't have, Draco," she insisted, pushing her wild light hair out of her imploring face. "Every time we went to fight, I hoped we would eventually convince you to join our side. I would never have murdered you, my own child-"

"Even now that you've got a spare?" Draco said sardonically, gesturing towards her stomach, and her hands tightened around it protectively. "A good replacement for the bad son. Father must have wanted that."

"Would you have killed me, given the chance?" Mother countered, looking perhaps not entirely sure of the negative she would hope to receive.

"No," Draco said immediately, knowing it to be the truth. "No, Mother, I couldn't have. You know that."

"So I am still your mother," Mother said softly, and Draco despised her in that moment.

"You can count on my mercy, then," Draco spat. "Don't mistake that for weakness."

"No, of course not," she said, and reached up and touched Draco's hot cheek. "No one is as strong as my boy."

Remus was the one to tell Draco that his mother had been formally granted asylum. "There were voices against it," Remus cautioned him. "This is a school as well as a fortress. And many feared she wanted to stay here as some kind of spy or trap. There were some who argued to keep her at Order safe houses throughout the war, that Xaphan was simply too

precious to risk for her. But in the end, the voices that said only Xaphan would truly be safe prevailed."

"Were you one of those voices?" Draco asked, and Remus nodded. "Thank you."

"I hope for all of our sakes that I was right," Remus said gravely, before leaning forward to embrace Draco, and breathed into his ear, "Severus has had a great deal to tell us about what really happened at Malfoy Manor."

Oh, well. Some part of Draco had known he'd be in for it before he got out of Xaphan. He turned to face Remus fully, waiting for Sirius to come in and form a tag team to admonish him for foolishness and lying.

Remus was enough to do so alone, though. "Draco, this idea to take a trip alone to Malfoy Manor, to go after the mirror- knowing the Death Eaters were there in more numbers- I can't understand it, save as a suicide mission. You can't imagine how that makes me fear for you."

"I heard voices," Draco said, which, granted, wasn't exactly likely to make Remus stop fearing for him. "I heard Dantanian's voice, urging me to go, and to go alone. I followed him."

Remus shook his head, looking in that moment singularly worn by the present that faced him. "Then we can only be grateful that Dantanian has been parted from you by the mirror, whatever threat he may pose in the future. Draco, you are too important to be so lightly sacrificed."

"Thank you," was all Draco could say to that, as Remus crushed him to a hug at his side, and Sirius at last entered the room to do the same. He felt the certainty he had not felt with his mother then, that he was safe in the midst of his family.

Draco departed Xaphan on that wind-whipping winter day without seeing his mother again. Xenophilius Lovegood saw him off with incessant questions about his daughter that Draco could only vaguely answer. It was a relief when the Portkey finally whisked him away, to a far snowier territory. L'Infern swam into view as he managed somehow to land on his feet, which he told himself boded well for whatever was to come. He hoped things had been well in his absence, after all. Who could tell what these Gryffindors and this wild Luna could have come up with in his absence?

Maybe they'd all decided to blame him for his past in the blue loop after all, without him there to prevent a consensus to that effect. Draco had to face that possibility too as only deserved, though he told himself it was his overactive mind presenting doomsday scenarios.

Their stance on the blue loop did not seem to have changed significantly, as he was nearly bowled over by hugs not just from Luna but from Hermione, and a man-hug from Ron, who all avowed they had missed him terribly in his absence. Harry was last, waiting for the chance to sweep him up into a passionate kiss hello.

"Frankenstein," Hermione said excitedly as soon as Harry and Draco were parted and Draco turned towards her, as if she had been waiting for this moment for days. "We've been going over everything over and over, the blue loop and the red line, and we think- oh, we just think we might-"

Trust Ron to cut off Hermione and deliver the information succinctly.

"Hermione thinks she knows where the Sword of Gryffindor is."

Where Your Treasure Lies

Ron, Hermione, and Luna had never been here before, so they spent their first portion of time gawking. Draco couldn't objectively blame them. Just the massive snow-covered peaks that flanked the mountain of the ruined fortress was redolent of the sublime. They stood there, all five of them, huddled together against the alpine wind, with white mountains looming up above them in every direction, Ron taking Hermione's hand and the other three cuddling close in face of the cold.

Luna broke off from where she was sandwiched between a protective Harry and Draco to jump up on a snow-covered rock and proclaim, "We're here! We're really here!" Given the number of careful Apparition trips they'd made to get here to Austria from Spain, not wanting to risk a Portkey over this distance, Draco could hardly blame her for her excitement.

And there was the wretched place itself, with those infamous words *For the Greater Good* still greeting anyone foolish enough to be its visitor. It was the same nowhere else, devastation wreaked by the battle and the explosion of the Höllenpfütze. Nurmengard was in its own way as much a ruin as Malfoy Manor, but broken by ice instead of fire. Snowfall covered its blocks of rock and its great fallen towers.

Draco wished he could turn back time and show his overenthusiastic cousin, the one who'd gotten him Grindelwald's memoirs, this place in all its foreboding glory. Luna would have loved it, down to the strange winding veined creature he remembered lining the way to the castle's depths.

As it was, what he had to show her was the aftermath of chaos, although it was chaos back what felt like a lifetime ago- Theo had still been alive to try to kill them then- a chaos that set off Draco's most immediate instinct saying, *The sword can't be here, Dumbledore wouldn't have left it in a place like this.*

But he knew better than to voice that. Hermione had been so certain the missing piece between Draco and Dumbledore was Grindelwald. She'd been convinced that reference in the will to the sword *as a reminder of their edifying chats* meant their talks about Grindelwald. Draco didn't know if he was so impressed by the idea- some bone-deep pessimism had settled in him that they were simply just never going to find the sword- but he went along with their new mission anyway.

The first hurdle cleared was done by them heading past the Greater Good sign and inside. It did seem, as Hermione had predicted, that the hell-lake and its demolition of the premises had succeeded in bringing down the place's formidable wards, so that nothing remained to keep anyone out save the place's inherent spookiness. They would not have to sneak back to Xaphan to try to enlist Dobby for this project, which was more of a relief than Draco would admit, after the affair of Wooky and Nissy had just come to something of a close.

"You really managed to do all this to this place?" Ron asked in awe, and Draco'd had help in that, but he still just turned backwards to retort,

"You should see the way I left Malfoy Manor."

So the search of Nurmengard began, beginning most intensively in Grindelwald's old cell, where Dumbledore would have known Draco had visited the old man several times. Draco stared numbly at the assortment of creature comforts he'd given Grindelwald now loose in the snow, though well-preserved by protective charms and the consistent cold in this part of the world. It was hard to retrace his steps here without his mind retracing the cut he'd made through Grindelwald then.

Nothing in the cell, and they all split up to do a survey of the grounds entirely, though with the codicil they all had to be careful not to break the ice and fall in the hell-lake, both to keep their magic and to keep from hypothermia. Draco scrutinized the area immediately below the *For the Greater Good* sign, thinking there to be the most concrete connection to Dumbledore, but he came up as wanting as he had digging under the rubble of the Potter house.

Luna attacked her task with enthusiasm, but the boys wearied sooner than she did, the old fatalism sneaking into the calls they made across the ruins to each other. "It has to be here," Hermione kept insisting stubbornly, "There's nowhere else to leave it related to Grindelwald"- that was, excepting Grindelwald's grave, but Draco had made that after Dumbledore's death. Draco was further convinced of its absence by the second hour and only making half-hearted attempts to dislodge the rubble by then.

The one other promising area was the foot of the stairs, where Grindelwald's ritual site had used to show itself, with the great basin with the Deathly Hallows symbol upon it. But that was all capsized down in the lake, and hidden under layers of ice. "You don't think Dumbledore would have left it in the hell-lake, do you?" Ron asked doubtfully, joining Draco where he stood carefully on the ice inspecting where the ritual site had been.

"There's no way," Draco said, rather depressed by their failure despite his low expectations.

Hermione brought out hazelnuts to roast around a fire they made at Nurmengard, but even Luna had difficulty mustering much enthusiasm after this latest misadventure. At least no one had showed up to ambush and kill them this time, but even that had made it feel like they were more on the trail of something. As it was, they were simply retracing Draco's steps from last year impotently-

Wait. *Retracing Draco's steps.*

"I think I have an idea where it might be," Draco said shakily, and had to repeat himself twice before they all heard him. "It's... it's just an idea, but... what if Dumbledore didn't leave it at Nurmengard, because anyone could go there and look... but then where else is important to Grindelwald and me..."

"Yeah, that's rather our conundrum here," Ron said bluntly, and Hermione shot him a shushing look.

"Except one place, if he knew it," Draco said, head whirling from the possibilities. "Either Grindelwald had showed it to him before, or maybe he traced the place by magic..."

"Tell us where! Don't leave us in suspense!" Luna pleaded, and Draco gave them all a grim smile.

"The place where Grindelwald died," Draco said. "Trust me, you'll like it. It's very beautiful."

There had been ice and snow there even in the summer, and as Draco Side-Alonged them all with him to the lake, he found the body of water fully frozen over. Craggy stone rose on all sides where they found themselves high in the mountains at the glacier lake: a different kind of hell-lake, the place where Grindelwald had gone to have himself cut right through. There were evergreen trees all around them, which Draco remembered reflected in the lake, that now cast their upside-down images with crystal clarity on the lake frozen in the arriving sunset.

"We have to hurry, we won't have the light for long," Hermione said anxiously. None of them wanted to stay in this frigid place overnight. "Draco, do you remember the exact spot Grindelwald died?"

"Do you think Dumbledore would have just buried it in the snow there?" Harry asked wonderingly, and Hermione shrugged weakly.

"That's what we're going to find out. Diffindo," Ron cast, and began to sort through piles of frozen snow. All of their cutting charms went only a surprisingly shallow amount, having to be cast several times until they at last reached the frozen ground or the black stone.

The four seventh-years were in full swing beginning their would-be excavation, but Luna was just standing there eerily, not doing a thing. "Luna, help us! We don't have time to bloody sight-see!" Draco groused at her, but she ignored him.

"Do you think... maybe..." she said thoughtfully, and Draco knew her well enough to see an idea coming. He climbed up from his lumps of snow and reached her side.

"Maybe what?"

"Do you think he might have left it inside the lake?" Luna asked simply, and Draco braced himself for a very uncomfortable and cold search.

"Luna thinks it might be *in* the lake!" Draco barked out at all of them, and one by one they emerged from the snow, looking a range of skeptical and hopeful. "Well, that's the landmark, isn't it?"

"It's not the smallest lake," Hermione observed, and Draco felt like throwing his wand at her and seeing what happened. Except maybe that was not such a foreboding prospect, without Dantanian in it anymore. Surprisingly, the power of the wand did not seem diminished, but all of its oddities related to Dantanian were.

Harry was the one to jump onto an idea from Draco, as always. "Let's see, then," he said with clearly false confidence, walking carefully on the surface of the frozen lake and gazing down

beneath his own feet, which must have been a disorienting experience, even for someone named Harry Potter. The others followed cautiously, watching their feet and listening for sounds in the creaking of the ice that indicated it was likely to give way.

"Don't worry, you could skate on this ice," Ron said cheerfully, and slid on his heels to show.

"Ron, no horsing about!" Hermione hissed furiously, pulling him back to her side, and they all continued to search the frozen lake, staring down while the reflection of the exposed sun from the sunset made the whole ice surface light up almost impenetrably with a golden glow.

The one to spot it was Harry, in what felt like destiny, drawing the Chosen One to his weapon. "Look!" Harry exclaimed, and the others gathered around at first tiredly and then with ear-piercing excitement. It looked like a metallic cross at first, and then Draco squinted past the sunset glow and could make out rubies along a golden hilt, and a long shimmering blade. He remembered this sword covered in blood, from one of his favorite visions of Harry, when he had just slain the Basilisk.

This was the sword that would have Basilisk venom for them. This was the sword they had been looking for so long without any progress, thinking the day would never come. This below them was the Sword of Gryffindor, frozen underwater, just a short distance beneath their feet. Dumbledore had done it. He had really left the Sword of Gryffindor for Draco at the lake where Grindelwald died.

"Accio sword," Harry tried, and nothing happened. "Well, it was worth a shot," he said defensively at their incredulous stares, then turned about and headed towards the shore, careful with his sliding feet again.

"Where are you going, the sword's right there," said Ron, and Harry set his shoulders determinedly.

"Someone's going to have to go in and get the sword from there," Harry said bravely, "And it might as well be me."

"Why not Ron, he's so much more expendable," Draco jibed, and Ron gave a half-hearted laugh as they all stared at Harry on the snowy shore. Off came all of Harry's warm layers, until at last he was shivering in his underwear against the encroaching twilight, the Horcrux hanging loose across his chest catching glittering reflections of sunset. None of them had volunteered to take Harry's place, in such bitter cold.

Draco thought he should have offered himself to do it, since Dumbledore had left the sword for him, but he didn't have the willpower to throw himself into that alpine freeze, and anyway, Harry was set at it by now. Harry crossed the lake barefoot with his wand in hand, ready to cut his way down into the depths-

"Wait! Harry!" Ron cried out, and Draco thought for an insane moment Ron was about to put himself forward instead, but it was Ron's common sense coming to the fore. "Give one of us the Horcrux first."

"So there's no chance it will be lost?" Luna asked, and Ron shrugged, but Hermione stared at the godforsaken thing intently until Harry had it off his neck and around Draco's. He also handed his glasses over to Draco for safekeeping.

"And we don't know how it would react, being so near to the only thing that can cause its destruction," Hermione filled in, and together, the four of them waited upon the shore and watched as Harry, now Horcrux-less, advanced towards his destiny.

"Diffindo," Harry said once he had reached the area above the sword. He cast it twice more, and the ice began to split open to reveal the icy water underneath. Harry had to back up rapidly to keep from falling into it, as pieces of ice floated on the surface now, detached from one another.

"Go, Harry!" Ron called.

"You can do this!" Luna cheered too.

"Be careful, Harry!" was Hermione's version of a cheer.

And Draco just yelled out, "Bring me that fucking sword!"

Harry took a deep breath, then, with all of them watching him, he went off the area with sure footing, positioned himself in a graceful stance, and dove down into the freezing water.

The others held their breath collectively, as if some monster was secretly waiting for Harry in the deeps, but nothing happened, only Harry surfacing without the sword, chest heaving for breath. "It's really deep," Harry called out to them, voice sounding choked as he shivered mightily. "Don't worry, I can get it."

"You've got this!" Ron yelled, and Harry dove in again. This time was longer, enough to make Draco's heart race with terrible uncertainty, until finally Harry surfaced again. This time, the sunset set off the gleam of the blade in the half-light.

"Harry!" they all cheered, Luna clapping her hands together hard, Draco a hair's breadth from running across the ice to grab Harry, but Harry staggered over to them first. "Oh, Harry!" went Hermione, and began to barrage him with warming and drying charms, while Harry pulled on his discarded clothes as quickly as he could with his numbed extremities. Hypothermia was not about to fell the Chosen One when so much else could not.

Draco stared at the Sword of Gryffindor mesmerized- somehow there was a different shine to it than the fake had had, perhaps simply because it was icy and wet- and Harry gave it to him, in a trade for his glasses, which he slid onto his face before surrendering to the others' flurry of charms to help him.

Draco's hand closed around the hilt of the Sword of Gryffindor, weighing it up in his grasp with a bounce of the thing. Except when Draco had gotten the sword securely in his grasp, he found he could no longer breathe anymore.

The force of the locket pulling at his neck sent him falling to the snow, the sword dropping from his hands as both went to his throat to futilely tug at the locket and try to get its throttling chain loose. The others didn't notice at first, too caught up in making much of their hero Harry, and by the time Luna made some remark for Draco and her cousin didn't answer, making her turn, it already felt as if it would be too late.

The chain was choking the life out of him, the weight of the Horcrux gone deadly heavy like a weight to hold the chain down unshakably. Draco gasped in great heaving gulps for breath that was no longer coming, as the others all finally turned and made cries of alarm. Draco felt he was being suffocated alive, throat constricted by each individual link in the chain digging in so deep it felt seared to the flesh, like it had done to Harry when Nagini attacked. Draco tried to call for help, but his voice came out strangled, as the world before him turned hazier and full of lights...

Draco came to with the Horcrux off his neck and thrown down into the snow, Hermione above him pocketing her wand with a shell-shocked look on her face. "Why would the Horcrux do that?" Draco heard Luna asking, and Harry answering,

"Maybe it senses its end is coming."

Draco picked himself up slowly and painfully, hands going reflexively to his throat to feel the cuts that had been left there by removing the chain. He was soaked to the bone with snow, so he cast his own drying and warming charms as Hermione ran over to help him the rest of the way up. Harry sprinted over too once he realized Draco was awake, seizing him by either side and staring passionately into Draco's eyes.

"Oh, dragon, we thought we'd lost you..."

For once, Draco wasn't in the mood for Harry's sentimentality. "I'm alive. What about that thing? What happened to the Horcrux?"

Slowly, ashen, Hermione gestured to where the locket lay discarded in the snow, the great oval sunken down lower in snow, its broken chain snaking through the whiteness like it might slither away at any second. It was no longer catching the light so much, but rather seemed to be absorbing it as they arrived at twilight, the sun going the last sliver down behind the mountains.

"We've got to destroy it," Ron said heatedly, coming over to stare at Draco's neck, "And we've got to do it now. If we leave it, who's to say what else it might do to us?"

Hermione hesitated. "Here?" she said, looking around at the darkening lakeside, and Ron nodded.

"Here," Harry agreed, and took out his wand and lit it. The others followed suit, until every Lumos glowed down and shone upon the locket's dark front. Draco was hit with a powerful sense of déjà vu from when they'd arrived back at their camp after the mission to Hogwarts, with what they had thought was the Sword of Gryffindor. They'd been as solemn raising their lights then the same, except now he knew for sure they had what it took, to put an end to that evil thing for good. The only question was who to do it.

Draco felt out of the running, with his breathing still coming back properly after the assault by the Horcrux. He glanced around at the others, then perhaps predictably, despite still shivering from his time underwater, Harry reached down into the snow and picked up the sword. "I'll do it," said Harry. "I'll destroy the Horcrux." Hermione fussed over him, trying to make sure he was alright, but Harry was unshakable. "I can do this. I think I've just realized how to open it."

"How?" they all asked, only for it to suddenly seem obvious when Harry told them,

"I'm going to tell it to open with Parseltongue."

"But it's not a snake," said Luna, only to squint down at it and go, "Wait, it rather is. The S for Slytherin looks like one, doesn't it?"

"Someone hold it in place while I open it," Harry ordered, and the others exchanged looks before Ron stepped forward and gingerly clasped the thing.

"It doesn't burn your hand, does it?" Hermione asked anxiously, and Ron shook his head.

"It's shaking a little, though," Ron said quietly. "It feels like it's moving now. Like it's scared of death."

"Harry, once it's open, stab it right away. We don't know what opening it will let out into the world..."

"Something like Tom Riddle?" Luna asked, wide-eyed, and all Hermione could answer her with was,

"Maybe."

Hermione stood beside them, holding out her wand in readiness for whatever was to come while Ron hauled up the locket onto a stone he cleared of snow, and Harry kept the sword in his hands and leaned down to whisper. A serpentine hiss came out of Harry's mouth, sounding unbearably loud in the mountain lake's silence, and the doors of the locket opened. Luna and Draco drew their wands too.

There were glass windows inside, but they had no photograph of loved ones in their confines. What looked out instead was eyes.

"Stab it, Harry!" Ron yelled, looking shaken by the revelation too, and Harry raised the sword high. Ron gripped the locket more tightly in his grasp.

Then a hissing voice came out of the open locket and said, "*I have seen your heart, and I know what you most fear*."

"Don't listen, just bring the sword down on it!" Ron said harshly, but Harry didn't move. He looked transfixed by the eyes and the voice before him, almost hypnotized, like some primal force had emerged and was drawing them together.

"*I have seen your dreams, Harry Potter, and I have seen your nightmares. I have seen you watch every one of your friends fall dead before your eyes.*"

"That voice," Luna hissed fearfully, "It's Tom Riddle!" She looked as though she never in a million years would have mistaken that voice.

"*Is that what you wish, Harry? Do you want your path to defeat your foes to be built upon the bones of those you left behind?*"

The sword shook in Harry's hand; Draco couldn't imagine why he wasn't just putting the thing down on the open locket. "Do it, Harry!" Draco urged, voice joining the chorus, but Harry only seemed to be listening to Riddle now.

"*Break me and you will become weak,*" Riddle's voice intoned seductively. "*Embrace me and you will become more powerful than you have ever dreamed.*"

"It's shaking more! I don't know what it's going to do!" Ron cried out, panicked, and then the locket showed truth to his words. Out of it bloomed the looming figure of Draco, more beautiful than the real Draco and yet with a hollowness in his red eyes. Ron snatched his hand away from the locket, looking scalded, and the locket rested untouched now on the stone, speaking to Harry with words that somehow paralyzed him and left the sword eternally raised but not falling.

Riddle-Draco spoke with Riddle's voice but Draco's distorted face, face so close to Harry's now he could practically kiss him. "*You say you love me... but you're not strong enough for me... you won't be strong enough when the time comes to keep me safe... You're going to watch me die in your arms, Harry Potter, and it will be your own fault...*"

"HARRY!" Hermione bellowed at the top of her lungs in sheer frustration, but none of them dared step closer to the locket, let alone try and take the sword from Harry's hands and do it themselves. And maybe Harry was the one who needed to do this after all, the one to face down this terrible voice and its lies and conquer them.

If he could conquer them.

"*You were a baby when your parents died... too small and weak to protect them... you are too small and weak still... I am going to leave you the way your parents left you, alone, Harry, all alone...*"

Riddle-Draco's eyes were shining red and Harry's glasses reflected only the red of the flame Riddle-Draco rose from, mesmerized with his mouth open and his heart looking in pieces.

"You have to kill it, Harry!" Draco yelled. "Don't listen to it! It's not real! I'm real, and I'm telling you to kill it!"

"*You will never have the power to protect me until you embrace the dark side... join me, Harry Potter, and you can have me forever... I will belong to you forever...*"

"Harry, it's not really Draco!" Luna shrieked, and the locket vibrated where it sat on the stone, so much Draco feared it could fly away at any moment with the spirit of Riddle attached, the piece of Voldemort unleashed and fully whole.

"*I will love you forever...*" Riddle-Draco cooed, and suddenly, Harry's face hardened.

"Draco never says forever," Harry said softly. "Not if he can help it. You're nothing like Draco. He says, until the end of the war." Harry's eyes went to the side to the real Draco, looking shaken from a trance, and stared back at the false Draco with Gryffindor conviction written all across his gorgeous frame. Harry raised the sword high, Luna let out a shrill, near-hysterical cheer, and Harry slashed the sword down on top of the Horcrux.

It was like an explosion, the way it threw the rest of them back. A scream sounded through the air, high and drawn-out, which Draco knew to be Riddle's voice. Harry did not flinch, standing there over the locket with power written over every inch of him, and perhaps Draco had a new favorite image of Harry to cherish to himself. That was, if it was done.

It was done. Draco inched closer to see what remained of the locket and was shocked to see the chain had broken off entirely. The glass windows where a loved one might have sat for someone else were shattered now, the silk lining was cut, and the entire thing was letting off smoke as thick as dragonfire had thrown in the air, if not as wide or as plentiful. The locket rested in several meager pieces on the stone and in the snow where some of it had fallen down from the impact.

Hermione carefully picked up the fallen pieces and laid them next to the rest on the stone. She ran her hand over the surface of the broken locket and smiled tentatively. "It's safe to touch. Just a little hot, still."

Harry stared at the remains too for one long moment, then let the Sword of Gryffindor slip from his fingers. He walked away from the four of them into the growing dusk, the sound of night birds and insects beginning to fill the clearing slowly. Draco glanced at the broken locket once more, then raced after Harry.

"Don't," Harry said when he saw Draco had come after him. His face was crumpled, utterly broken. He was not quite crying, not that, but it would almost have been more comforting if he had been, in place of this utter silent misery he had been transfigured to. "Don't, Draco."

"Are you embarrassed?" Draco asked, grabbing Harry by both hands. "Because you shouldn't be. If that's the worst the locket can say to you... we all worry about each other dying in this war. If anything, I'm touched you care so much what happens to me," Draco added lightly, and received a truly fierce glare for that lightness. "Sorry, sorry. I just mean... don't be ashamed."

"I'm not ashamed," Harry said dully, eyes going from Draco's to stare down into the snow at his feet. "I'm not ashamed at all. It's just that- that thing- it was right. No matter what I do, I can't protect you, can I?"

"Harry," Draco said, truly disturbed, "You've always protected me. You're always my savior-"

"But it's not enough, if you go away and leave me behind, like you did at Malfoy Manor," Harry said darkly, eyes going to meet Draco's again. "I can't protect you then."

"Well, maybe I can protect myself," Draco said tightly, and Harry shook his head.

"I'm going to lose you," he said with utter conviction, and the worst part was, the honest part of Draco was saying back, *Yes, you will, and in not too long now.*

"You won't," Draco lied, and enveloped Harry in his arms.

The Assistant

Harry was being strange with Draco after the incident destroying the Horcrux. The clearest proof of that was that they hadn't had sex since Draco had told them about the blue loop. Draco must have gotten more used to doing it regularly than he realized, because he was starting to keenly feel the lack.

Nor did abstinence keep Draco's mind off it. If anything, it put it on it more, always hyperconscious around Harry, of Harry's body and the things he wanted Harry to do to him, if only he would. The way Harry could keep his mind from wondering what Dantanian was doing and to whom.

But now with his secret out Draco lacked the courage to openly initiate, and Harry never seemed interested, so Draco had to go without, despite the very real clock ticking down to when Draco wouldn't be able to have sex or do anything ever again.

It was the worst at nights like this one, when they shared their bed at L'Infern, and Draco had to pretend there were no more possibilities to this arrangement than talking and sleeping.

"What are we going to do now that we have the Sword of Gryffindor and the locket has been destroyed?" Harry asked that night. "If Hermione's right, and the last Horcrux is inside Hogwarts, then..."

"Then all we can do is wait around until the Order decides it's time to make the assault on Hogwarts, so we can make our way in," Draco concluded gloomily. It was indeed a great weight off his mind not to have the Horcrux with them to wear anymore, but now, what next? "Yes, it's a waiting game."

Harry's green eyes shone intelligently behind his glasses in a way that often made Draco think about kissing him. "So then where do we wait, and what do we do in the meantime?"

"What we have to do, really," Draco said heavily, "Is to give it our best shot to make sure everything is ready for the assault and we're likely to have success when we finally go to war."

Harry smiled at him adorably, sleepy and guileless. "And how do we do that?"

Draco heaved a sigh, wishing he could share Harry's easy demeanor. "I don't know, alright? Do you want to get some sleep?"

"Okay," Harry yawned, and that ended the discussion.

It picked back up at breakfast the next morning, with Luna voicing similar sentiments. She always had been a sharp one, his cousin. Hermione hemmed and hawed, but even she had to

agree. Now that they'd finally been partway successful, none of them knew where to turn now.

"We should try to contribute to the war effort," Hermione said tentatively, and Ron laughed coarsely.

"How exactly are we supposed to do that now? Hunt down and curse Death Eaters for sport?"

Luna raised her hand. "Oh, I rather like that idea."

"Don't be ridiculous," Hermione sighed. "Well, I didn't want to say it, but I'm sure we're all thinking the obvious." She winced when they all just blinked at her. "Go back to Xaphan, for good this time."

"What?" Ron complained. "Back to our parents? Well, not yours, Hermione, but you know what I mean. Back to Mum and Dad?"

"The obvious way to contribute to the war effort," Hermione said primly, "Is by *contributing to the war effort.* Really, it makes the most sense to place ourselves at the disposal of the Order for however they may need us going forward-"

"I don't see how it makes sense at all," Ron groused, and Hermione was clearly affronted. Nor did she seem pleased when Draco took Ron's part.

"Oh, come on, Striker, what if they just expect us to come back and be regular students?"

"They definitely would for me," said Luna the sixth-year.

"They wouldn't!" Hermione exclaimed, truly piqued, before relenting. "And well, I mean- really, if they did, would that be the worst idea? Sometimes I think none of you appreciate the value of a good education!" She broke off indignantly when her boyfriend made gagging noises. "You stop that!"

"Well, we have the notebooks," Luna said thoughtfully, and reached for Hermione's satchel where she kept them all now. "Could they tell us what to do? Draco, in the blue loop, what were Harry and everyone doing during this part of the year?"

"I only know part of it," Draco said hesitantly, feeling once again how much easier this would have been, if he had only been on the right side the first time around.

He went over their capture at Malfoy Manor for them, telling of recognizing Harry and refusing to identify him for the Death Eaters, and leaving off on the rest of his role which painted him as such an inveterate coward. But he could tell he couldn't really communicate the immensity of it to them. As much as they claimed to understand, the notebooks were like exciting books to them, which of course Hermione dove in to research like scholarly tomes.

He went over the lesser portion he knew about their escapade at Gringotts, taking the cup which in their world had long since been destroyed by Dumbledore. The story was received with great delight by Harry and Ron, envy by Luna, and great anxiety by Hermione. "Could

we really have broken into Gringotts, of all places," she fretted, poring over the pages, "And stolen a dragon?"

"What must it be like to ride a dragon?" Luna asked Harry dreamily.

"I don't know," Harry said, and directed her towards Draco. "He's the only one of us who knows now."

"What is it like to ride a dragon, Draco?" Luna asked.

"I don't know," Draco said uncomfortably. "It feels tenuous, I guess. I was a little too busy watching the dragon eat all my relatives to really take in my experience."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have brought it up," Luna said earnestly, and took his arm, leaning her head against his shoulder.

"We must have been after Hufflepuff's Cup," Hermione summarized, "Which Draco and Harry robbed from Gringotts in fifth year, and we know Dumbledore destroyed with the Sword of Gryffindor. So we don't need to worry about any of that. The only Horcruxes remaining for us to destroy are the Horcrux at Hogwarts in the Room of Requirement, and Nagini."

"Well, Neville's going to be taking care of that last one," Ron jibed, amused by as well as jealous of that alleged feat of bravery by his captive friend.

"We can't count on that, the butterfly effect is too strong," Hermione said, frowning, which was a nice way of putting it, that none of them could be certain Neville was still even alive. "We'll have to take care of Nagini, all of us, at Hogwarts when it's time for the invasion."

They all went over the notebooks in exhaustive detail, but Hermione concluded, and they all had to agree, that there was no stone left unturned that Draco knew of for their party. Which left Hermione's proposal of Xaphan still on the table.

The five of them arrived at Xaphan on the beaches by midday, all of their belongings taken from L'Infern along with a sizable supply of hazelnuts, and began to weave their way around the buildings to avoid causing a scene before they met Sirius and Remus. Except at this time of day Sirius and Remus were teaching, so they all decided to head straight to Professor McGonagall's office to make their announcement. They'd have to see what she thought of having the Chosen One and his closest allies back on her hands.

McGonagall called for them to come in, the office unlocked, only to freeze in shock where she had been writing in a great tome at the sight of the five of them. "Mr. Potter and company," she said finally, closing the book on her desk with a loud thud. "Come in. It is very good to see you all are well."

"It's good to see you as well, Professor McGonagall. We're all so pleased to see you," Hermione said earnestly, at which Ron nudged Draco surreptitiously and mouthed, *Suck-up.*

"Truly a pleasure, yes. How may I assist you?" McGonagall asked, eyes narrowing at them assessingly. Luna fidgeted under her stare like a truant derelict from class.

"We're back," Draco said, taking the plunge and making the announcement for them. "We're back to Xaphan, for now until the war is over. That is, if you'll still take us."

"We've come to contribute to the war effort," Hermione said earnestly.

"Am I to take it that your mission from Dumbledore is now completed?" McGonagall asked wanly, eyeing them all with a healthy share of skepticism.

"I'm sorry, but we can't tell you that," Harry said earnestly, and McGonagall's lip twisted in what might have been a laugh from another woman.

"Very well. Classes are getting out soon. I'll send for your guardians and Professor Snape. Together, we should be able to decide how you can," McGonagall lowered her spectacles slightly, "Best contribute to the war effort."

Sirius nearly hugged the life out of Harry, and then out of Draco, despite having seen Draco recently for his mother's tribunal. Remus followed suit, while Severus stood at a strategic remove from all the hugging and carrying on. Draco put an arm around Hermione after, who was watching the Weasleys with that strange look that meant she was thinking of her Obliviated parents.

"This is the right decision," Xenophilius said pointedly, clasping Luna so tightly she seemed to chafe at his hold. "Xaphan is where all of you belong."

"No one is arguing with you, Xenophilius," said Molly Weasley, rather sniffy. "Our children have done what they had to do, and now they've returned to us." She gave Harry a sizable hug, while Harry looked overwhelmed by the outpouring of affection. "Isn't that right?"

"The only question," Severus intoned, "Is what is to be done with them." Severus earned some glares for undercutting the sentimentality at play, but truth be told, he was right on the money.

"We want to join as junior members of the Order of the Phoenix," Draco said immediately, and received an assessing look from McGonagall. "Don't we, everyone?"

"Oh, yes, do please let us join," said Luna, while the others nodded along.

"Despite your inability to provide a satisfactory account of your movements this year," McGonagall said rather sternly, "The Order understands you have been under extenuating circumstances, and I see no reason why the five of you should not be admitted to our ranks, as you say, as junior members."

Draco contributed to overwhelming Harry by hugging him too then, fiercely from behind for a moment in McGonagall's prodigiously crowded office. "We don't just want to go back to

classes like nothing happened," Draco said, resisting the urge to nuzzle at Harry's neck. "Is there something else we can do to contribute more?"

Sirius looked thoughtful without further delay. "You know, I could use an assistant at my dueling classes. Headmistress, might Draco do for the position?"

"There is the matter," McGonagall said dryly, "Of Mr. Black's pending suspension from Hogwarts. But since this is Xaphan, and dueling classes are indeed of utmost importance, I would grant that request. With the codicil that Mr. Black will not be teaching dark magic to my students."

"Oh, of course not, never," said Draco airily, while Luna beamed, probably about just how much dark magic Draco had managed to teach her in their studies together. "Sirius, that's a great idea. If you really think I can be helpful, I'd be glad to be your assistant."

"If we're in the market for assistants," Remus put in, "Harry has always been an exemplary student in Defense Against the Dark Arts. I believe his presence in the classroom with me would help instruct and inspire my students like little else." Harry grinned at Remus broadly.

"Another reasonable request," McGonagall said smoothly. "Again, I see no reason why not. You are right about the inspiration Mr. Potter can pose to the student body. Miss Granger, Mr. Weasley, I will speak to the other professors. I have no doubt that assistant positions can be found for you, in which you will be more useful than simply continuing your own studies during wartime."

"What about me?" said Luna expectantly, and Xenophilius looked irked.

"You'll be continuing in your studies, of course, like you should have been all along," he said sternly, and McGonagall regarded the two of them with a regretful sternness of her own.

"Miss Lovegood, talented as you are, you indeed remain a sixth-year, and so you will be returning to your previous schedule at Xaphan School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"No!" Luna exclaimed, looking to Draco for support. "That's not fair! I'm more than just another student now!"

"Rest assured, Miss Lovegood," Remus said gently, "You will be trained to fight as well in your classes as you may have been elsewhere."

Luna looked tempted to stomp out of the office and make a scene, but without anyone to make it with her, she relented. "This isn't fair," she said again, but more quietly, no longer an active protest.

"Just think, Luna-Luna," Draco said, sticking his tongue out at her, "I'll be your assistant professor at dueling."

Luna brightened and tried to look tough. "Then you know you'll have at least one student who can wipe the floor with you." Draco grinned at her and didn't argue the point.

On the night of their arrival, Draco stole down to the dungeons to see his mother. He found her in her cell unchanged save the more groomed state of her, hair no longer wild but done up like she had used to have it at Malfoy Manor. She was dressed in sedate slate-colored robes, Dark Mark of course demurely covered, belly perhaps if anything grown slightly bigger, looking the picture of a pregnant woman about to give birth sometime very soon.

She looked up and brightened when she saw Draco, so that dealt with one prospective problem right there. Draco had feared she wouldn't want to see him, after he abandoned her to her fate of imprisonment, but she seemed pleased enough.

"My son," she said, and went forward to kiss him on the cheek. Draco tensed and didn't reciprocate, but didn't pull away either.

"I wanted to tell you," Draco said guardedly, "That I'm back at Xaphan for good. I'll be staying here for the foreseeable future. So if you need something, I'll be there for you to ask for now. Do you understand me?"

"That's wonderful, Draco," she said, with a certain constraint in her affectionate manner now to match Draco. "I had hoped to have many more talks with you."

"Ask for me only if you need something badly," Draco said, feeling frustration spike up too easily inside him. He had the image of her and Father in mind, standing before the cellar doors in his way, shooting Stunners at him. He had so many images of her against him in his head, it was hard to reconcile them with this seemingly helpless and pleasant creature she had become, the picture of a deserving recipient of asylum. "If there's some emergency. I'm going to be very busy. Too busy to be running about at the beck and call of my mother."

"Of course," Mother said carefully, seeming ready to tiptoe around his mood if need be. And perhaps she needed to. Draco had been feeling buoyant after his new assignment of Sirius's assistant had given him new purpose, but now he felt dragged back down to his mother's level, and there was nothing he could do about it. Especially if she persisted in acting such the model mother.

If Draco had been a kinder person, he might have said something about Father's death, inquire after her mourning. Maybe he would have even apologized for torturing her atop the library tower. But Draco found he didn't have either of those sets of words in him. He left his mother instead without a further word.

Draco found that he and Harry had been left the set of rooms they had previously stayed in, like some lavish show of support for their relationship, and didn't see fit to dispute the assignment. Even if he felt a certain shyness around Harry now if they weren't going to have sex anymore, the awareness of his own frustration bubbling over without its primary outlet to satisfy it.

He had a different outlet tomorrow, in the dueling classes he and Sirius gave. Every student at Xaphan had dueling every other day, so Draco found his first day to be truly packed. He and the other assistants had been cleared spots to sit at up at the staff table, but he waved

vigorously down at a pouty Luna at Ravenclaw. He stuffed his face vigorously, grateful for the part of living at Xaphan that meant three square house elf meals a day, and then gave Harry a kiss on the cheek goodbye before they parted for their respective duties.

Ron and Hermione went trailing off after Professor Flitwick, who had taken them both on as his Charms assistants in another vitally important class for the war. Draco gave Ron a thumbs-up before he too disappeared from view.

Being an assistant was less work than Draco had expected, with the most labor coming at the end of each session, when Draco had to do what had previously been Sirius's work: repairing the curse-torn classroom before the next set of students arrived. For the rest, he deferred to Sirius's instruction, as it was clear Sirius had become something Draco had honestly never believed Sirius could become: a good teacher.

There were no incidents as a result.

There was no incident, that was, at least until the final period of the day, which took the students Draco had been most dreading: seventh-year Ravenclaws and Slytherins. Millie stood with the Ravenclaws as the only seventh-year Slytherin present at Xaphan, looking out of place amongst them, but not particularly caring about that outsider status. Her gaze was fixed instead on Draco at the front of the classroom, with a malice on her broad face impossible to mistake. Draco tried to mistake it, telling himself she was merely worked up in preparation for dueling class, but that was of course not the case. Quite the contrary. She seemed the participant out of everyone all of today to least see the point in their dueling lessons.

Sirius set the students to warm up casting the knockback jinx on the training dummies, but in a lull in casting, Millie could be distinctly heard saying, "There's no use to this class anyway, as long as Professor Black refuses to teach us dark magic."

From the look on Sirius's face, he had heard this exact complaint so many times, he lacked the patience to be restrained in the face of it. "Miss Bulstrode, there's a place where they'll teach you all the dark magic you desire. It's called Hogwarts. You're welcome to go there instead."

So this was Sirius as a professor. Draco cringed, unable to hide his extreme reaction to Sirius's words when he knew how very much Millie, at least once before him, had regretted not going to Hogwarts.

Say what you liked of Sirius's methods, it at least had the intended effect of quieting Millie's complaints. She was resentful but quiet as Sirius took to the front of the room to teach them today's dueling spell.

The dueling classroom was a long ovular hall that reminded Draco of the dueling room the Room of Requirement had always produced for him. It was one similarly made out of obsidian due to the composition of Xaphan and its walls. They were out near the sea walls, with a visible drop to the beach below them that spoke very much to the need for the dueling wards, which were set up in an oval in front of the bleachers on either side, keeping the spectators safe and the dueling participants from being able to send each other hurtling to

their doom. Overall a curious room due to its location if nothing else, but very picturesque, carved out of the side of Xaphan's stone and cliffs as it was. Draco looked forward to teaching here more.

The dueling curriculum inevitably intersected with the Defense one sometimes, but Sirius and Remus seemed to have it well worked out who took what. Today Sirius would be reviewing Expulso; the seventh-years were far beyond the days they would have been wasting time with minor jinxes like Rictusempra and Tarantallegra. They took their seats on the bleachers facing Sirius's lectern, while Draco hovered behind Sirius taking notes.

Sirius advised them extreme caution with the Expulso curse, given the power it could generate. "This is not a curse you want to catch your friends with," he warned, before demonstrating the wand motion in minute detail. Despite Millie's past snide comments, and despite the fact that this was a review day, all of the seventh-years showed intense interest in Sirius's every movement. Anthony Goldstein was taking frantic notes himself, while Terry Boot and Michael Corner looked hypnotized by Sirius. Padma Patil was mouthing along to Sirius's explanation, seeming to have memorized it from previous classes, and looking no less rapt by it.

It was natural. Sirius was a well-known expert in dueling, enough to have captured all their respect even without half a year teaching them in the subject, and what could be of more importance than dueling, outlaws as they had made themselves by attending Xaphan? Let alone what they must know, as everyone at Xaphan down to the first-years seemed to on some level realize: they were being readied as soldiers for war, in the effort to take their rightful home of Hogwarts back.

Millie sat with her arms crossed, but craned her head along with the rest of them to watch Sirius demonstrate on a training dummy. Sirius cast the curse, and the dummy went hurtling into the nearest wall in a flare of blue light. It almost seemed a miracle for the tall obsidian-colored thing to survive the experience, but Sirius with a flick of his wand spirited the dummy back into its previous place, without a hint of damage on it.

"My assistant, Draco, will now demonstrate the Expulso curse for you," Sirius told them. "Draco, do you have any advice to give the students about Expulso?"

Draco didn't tend to use this curse much in dueling. He opted largely for more damaging ones. So he had to rack his brain for something useful to say to justify his presence here, especially before the judging eyes of Millie. "Just the light can be useful, one as bright as this one, if it blinds your opponent for a moment," he added at last, "So that's a double benefit for what it can do."

Draco demonstrated the Expulso curse without thinking much, just unleashing upon the dummy. He should have been thinking of ties of restraint on the talon wand, but he wasn't. So the dummy went flying so hard it rebounded off the nearest wall and towards the cliff drop, where the wards thankfully caught it and kept it from falling over. Padma Patil, the teacher's pet, raced over to recover it for them.

Draco wasn't sure if he should apologize for shooting too hard and making himself seem like a show-off, but he supposed it was what he was there for, after all, his proficiency in curses.

It certainly wasn't for his good looks and his sparkling personality.

Sirius had them come forward one by one and attempt the Expulso curse, which went well on the whole, though Terry Boot's didn't quite knock the dummy all the way back into the wall, and Kevin Entwhistle's barely produced any of the telltale blue light. Sirius separated them all into pairs then to practice- carefully- casting Expulso on each other, with the other student attempting to block it with Protego.

Millie ended up with Padma. Padma's tentatively friendly greeting was ignored completely by a surly Millie, as she lined up on her side without a word to do her job.

Draco did his job of going around and adjusting subtle issues with students' stances and wand movement, though in truth, most of them had it down well, and were soon sending each other flying with aplomb. Draco's greatest contribution was helping pick up fallen, winded students and give them reassurance before they went back to their places, for their turn to toss their partners into the air.

The only problem there happened when Kevin Entwhistle's Expulso for Terry Boot went awry to the side and hit an unsuspecting Millie, who crashed up into the side wards without warning. She picked herself up without accepting Draco's hand, and rounded on Entwhistle so darkly the Ravenclaw nearly fell over in fear.

"I'm sorry, Bulstrode!" Entwhistle cried out. "It was a mistake! Please..." *Please don't kill me* was the implied plea. Nice to see that in Draco's absence, Millie had been making friends and influencing people.

Still, though, after Draco had operated in previous years at Hogwarts, he couldn't blame her for wanting to be feared. He knew the seduction of that sensation all too well, especially when you felt yourself an outsider from your year regardless. He just wished he had the right to take her aside after class and speak to her of it, instead of steering clear like he knew she wanted.

Except maybe she didn't want to steer so clear of him after all. Once the training dummies were cleared out of the way, the real fun could begin. The class always ended with a practice duel, either Sirius showing off his technique going easy on one of the students, or two students having an impassioned sparring session. It was dangerous, yes, but the entire class was, to be fair...

Too dangerous, it turned out, as Sirius put Draco forward this time, crowing, "Does anyone want to take on my new assistant for a practice duel? No, I don't see any hands... that's right, I didn't think so... suppose I'll have to-"

"I'll take him on," said Millie, standing with her wand already drawn and held high.

Draco shot Sirius a pleading glance, but either Sirius didn't know about the tension between Draco and Millie, or he expected Draco as his assistant to be able to deal with it maturely. "Go on, then," Sirius said, gesturing Millie forward from the bleachers to join Draco on the floor.

Millie only gave him the most perfunctory of bows before she turned and stomped back to her side of the room. There were some soft gasps at that from the watching Ravenclaws on the shielded bleachers, but no one spoke. Then Sirius called out, "Go," and Millie shouted,

"Expulso!" and sent Draco flying.

Draco hadn't meant to strike at her first. He'd meant to give her that privilege, but he'd meant to block her curse, at least. That didn't happen. He hit the back wall with a brilliant explosion of blue light, which, yes, blinded him as Millie dove forward and cast Flipendo to make him hurtle through the air again, landing at her feet. She did not wait for him to get up, as one might have in a friendly sparring duel, but sent down a Deprimo that left deep holes in the floor when Draco rolled away just in time.

Draco wanted to yell for her to calm down, but he should have been fighting her back. He found he barely had the will to, despite her increasing ire, written across her reddening face as she advanced on his retreating form. She sent him soaring back again with an explosion whose air impact caught him and threw him, a Reducto full of so much spite, Draco felt Sirius would have to call off the duel, but he did no such thing...

Draco cast red sparks from the end of his wand to blind her briefly and gain his bearings, and she stopped advancing to laugh bitterly. "Vermillious? Did you really just cast *Vermillious* at me? Fight me for real, Malfoy!"

Draco steeled himself at the sound of the provoking last name. "My name," he said through gritted teeth, "Is Draco Black," and when she cast Expulso at him again, his shield held, sending the classroom around him erupting with the full force she had put into the curse.

"Fight me, Draco Black," Millie called, and kept shooting blasts of blue light at him, forcing him with his shield backwards. Draco couldn't remember being this afraid except in the real fights that had faced him in his time, like when he had snuck into Malfoy Manor on his own, because Millie really did seem to want him dead in a way his parents hadn't...

"Reducto!" Millie shrieked, and the stone beneath them gave way, exploding out over them both as Draco's shield broke.

What she leveled at him next was a spell he had never expected in a duel, but perhaps Millie's parents had used it on her, as his had used to on him: a stinging hex, which caught him in the face squarely and set a red welt rising over his left cheekbone. Draco reached up and touched his face, stunned as he would not have been by a Stupefy.

"Fight me," Millie said, and something in Draco finally settled.

"Fine," Draco said levelly, "I hope you're ready," and floored her immediately with a Flipendo too quick for her to shield. Then he was on top of her practically, using the trip jinx to keep her from getting to her feet successfully. She would not be standing again, he resolved, before he was through with her.

Draco cast Expulso to show it to the class, and Millie made a satisfying thud as she impacted the other wall, much like she had made him before. Draco could have caught her with

Expelliarmus then and ended it, but he didn't. Instead, he hit her with Conjunctivitis, blinding her, then Langlock, silencing her, and her wordless attempt to retaliate from on her knees sailed well clear of him.

He could hear the class gasp as he skidded forward on the obsidian floor to reach her at point-blank range and shoot Deprimo down- see if she liked that spell so much now- deliberately missing her, but making the floor just underneath her cave in beneath. She screamed, blind as she was, clawing at the floor trying to keep her balance, and he sent the debris flying at her all at once. He could see it cut her face and bruise her.

"Petrificus totalus," Draco said, with no need to cast wordlessly now, and Millie fell helpless to the ground, defeated in every way possible. He wouldn't even give her the courtesy of a working mouth or body to yield to him formally with. He had shown her what became of those who spoke ill of Draco Black-

And then he heard the shell-shocked applause of his audience, including a rather pale Sirius. "And that's why he's my dueling assistant, ladies and gentlemen! Draco, if you'll be so kind to take the curses off Miss Bulstrode... yes, another round of applause for Mr. Black..."

Draco came back to himself slowly at dinner that night, bloodthirsty haze lifting bit by bit until he could see clearly what he had done. He went to Madam Pomfrey to have his face healed, but that didn't help his mind. He was quiet that meal as a result, seated up at the staff table with the other three, despite Ron's enthusiasm about his new position- Ron did seem to like lording it over younger students, as well as his contemporaries- and Hermione's obvious pride for him. Harry also had a great deal good to say about his new job as Defense assistant, so Draco forced himself to pretend to be in a good mood and effuse about his position too.

Harry saw through it, though, as the other two likely did too, and when Harry and Draco were settled in for the night in their room, he saw fit to question Draco about it. Draco knew Harry might hear about the duel with Millie sooner or later, so the truth was forced out of him.

"I had a duel in class with Millie today," Draco admitted, and Harry looked confused.

"And why is that bad?"

It all came tumbling out then, in this era when Draco was determined to- almost- be as honest with Harry as possible. Millie uncovering the truth of Theo's death, and her failed attempt to torture him for it. Her regret for having chosen their side. The spite she had challenged him and fought the duel with, and the excessive force Draco had used in humiliating her for it.

"Draco, you need to go to the teachers with this," Harry said immediately. "This is like Theodore Nott all over again. Someone's after you because you killed someone close to them, but you won't turn them in because of some misguided sense of loyalty, or guilt-"

"This is nothing like Theo," Draco retorted, angered by the mere idea. "Millie will come around. We just need to give her time. And if you go to the authorities about her for me, I'll never forgive you."

Harry groaned. "Draco, you make it so hard sometimes to look after you."

"Well, maybe you don't have to," Draco said crossly, and Harry shook his head and said earnestly,

"No, I really, really think I do. I hope I can. I hope- I guess I just hope I'll be there to."

"What do you mean?" Draco asked, and Harry left their bed and went to get one of the notebooks. Draco tensed when he saw it was the seventh one, and tensed further when he saw the passage Harry had opened it to. It was the part where Draco told of Harry dying and coming back from the dead to kill Voldemort.

"What is this, Draco? What do you mean, I come back to life? Like Dantanian Noir? I don't understand."

"I had wondered if you would ever find that part," Draco said weakly. "I don't know what to say, okay, Harry? I wasn't your friend then. I wasn't your anything. All I know is that it seemed you were dead, and You-Know-Who was crowing over it, and then you weren't, and you were fighting again. And you killed You-Know-Who then. That's all I have to give you, Harry."

"But I can't do that," Harry said wonderingly. "*I* can't die and come back to life."

"Harry," Draco said, throat clogging, "If anyone can, you can."

Harry fell asleep in some time, but Draco found he couldn't sleep that night, so he dressed himself and headed out of their room. His footsteps took him towards his mother's cell, for some unknown reason. Had that apology finally come up inside him? He didn't think so. He just knew he wanted to speak with her, and now.

The guard on her cell, who seemed to be dozing off, let Draco in without any fanfare. Draco went past him and opened the door slowly, not sure if he would be waking her from sleep, but from the sound of her breath, she wasn't sleeping. It was coming thick and fast, enough that it alarmed Draco as he carefully let the door shut behind him.

Mother's breath was like that because she was crying. Draco didn't realize it at first, taking a tentative step towards where she lay on her side. But the sight of her coiled up, her hands in fists on the blanket, and her red swollen face testified to the fact that those heavy breaths were muffled sobs.

Draco was left with no earthly idea what to do, regretting having let himself into the cell now. Was he meant to do the human thing, and take his mother into his arms to comfort her?

"Lucius," he heard Mother sob more loudly. "Oh, Lucius..."

One tantamount to the murderer of Lucius Malfoy would not be wanted here. Draco took a deep breath, retreated as quietly as possible, and left the room with her still crying.

Far Point

Chapter Notes

Playlist

February 14 came on a Friday that year, with the world still buried everywhere to be seen in snow. The view from the dueling classroom testified to that, as even the beaches were shores of pure white, the water lapping up right against the snow. Draco shook his head at the sight, turning back towards making sure the training dummies were set for the first class of the day, and then someone red-headed barreled in at record speed.

"Ron?" Draco said, blinking at the blur his friend had made, and Ron seized him by the shoulders with a face of pure ragged panic.

"I forgot!" Ron proclaimed, and Draco peered at him doubtfully.

"Forgot what?"

"I forgot today is Valentine's Day!" Ron lamented, and actually physically shook Draco as he wailed, "What am I going to do?"

"Okay, calm down, calm down," Draco said, trying to hold back his laughter, and Ron noticed that without much humor himself.

"It's easy for you to laugh, Harry's probably taking care of all the romance bit for you two," Ron said resentfully, sounding as if he wished he could throw it all off on Hermione too. "Isn't he?"

"That's what he said," Draco said contentedly, and Ron grimaced at him mightily.

"What am I going to do?"

"Ron, are you quite alright?" Luna asked as she filed in for her first period class. "You look rather flustered."

Ron turned to tell his woes to her, seeming to sense a more sympathetic ear, while Luna's classmates and Sirius streamed in around them.

"Ron Weasley," Sirius said pointedly, "Isn't there a Charms class somewhere you should be assisting?"

"Yes! Right!" Ron cried out, and Draco heard Luna tell him before he went,

"Don't worry, Ron, I have something figured out for the two of you."

Draco could only shudder to think what that inspiration could be, coming from Luna of all people, but they had to snap to attention.

Sirius was in a good mood, after his specially imported snowdrops to Remus at the breakfast table had gone over well, and a very happy Sirius meant slightly manic Sirius. Remus had smiled and looked pleased at the gift, and now Sirius was bouncing off the walls, making the sixth-years grin and whisper to each other.

After they had Luna and her cohort, second-year Ravenclaws and Slytherins were next, which Draco secretly dreaded. Not because of any students acting up or questioning his authority, nothing of the sort. But because he had fans in that class.

Sasha, Connor, and Dieter, all Muggleborn, were second-years now, but they had been first-years when they had been menaced by Fenrir Greyback during the fall of Hogwarts. And it had been Draco and Luna to come in and save the day, rescuing their foolish little hides, though in truth the way Draco remembered it, Luna had been the one to do the heavy lifting there. He'd been too shell-shocked by what he'd just done to Theo to contribute much more than curses.

It seemed to have been more than enough to win their adulation. "Hello, Mr. Black!" All three chorused in unison when Draco walked back into the room after his break- these three always contrived to arrive early- and beamed up at him with stars in their eyes. Draco did his best to greet them cordially without encouraging them too much. Was this what Harry had to deal with from the Creeveys? If so, he had new sympathy for him. Not to mention how unreal it seemed, to have sweet little children praising the name of the wizard who'd brought Dantanian Noir back from the dead.

This class was just that little bit worse, because it was Valentine's Day, and the three of them had a special surprise for him. "Here, Mr. Black!" Dieter called out rapturously, "Happy Valentine's Day!" and presented him with a massive pink heart-shaped card. It read in large, unmistakable letters, *To Our Hero*, on the front, with Sasha, Connor, and Dieter's names all on the back.

"Th-thank you," Draco stammered, truly unsure what to say. Hero? He had never believed himself anything of the kind. Had he been a hero to these children? Well, whether or not it was true, he was accepting this valentine at his peril, if Harry saw him with it before he could explain. He was pretty sure Harry would throw a gasket at the sight of Draco carrying someone else's Valentine.

Which did, as it happen, unfold at lunch just as he had feared. Harry saw him with the heart-shaped paper and was immediately beyond himself. But eventually Draco managed to quiet Harry's jealousy long enough to show him the names on the back, and assure him three second-year Ravenclaws were no threat to Draco's affections.

Hermione eyed them suspiciously as Draco, Ron, and Luna skipped out early on lunch, but she couldn't follow them with Charms pupils coming up to her asking their earnest little

questions. For some reason, none of the students seemed overly keen to present their difficulties to Ron.

Luna took them straight to the greenhouse, where they passed by a happily humming Professor Sprout on their way through. Ron looked as frazzled as before, but more hopeful given Luna's reassurance. And perhaps Draco had been wrong to so soundly doubt her, as she presented a solution that doubtless would have belonged to her and Neville, had Neville been here.

"These are Eurydice lilies," Luna presented to them. "They're an Asiatic breed. Neville's the one who planted them here, so you can do whatever you want with them. There's a fair amount, so perhaps you could adorn somewhere special with them and save some to give to her personally."

From the distant look on Luna's face, it seemed she was imagining Neville doing the same for her in other circumstances. But she didn't seem to hesitate to pass on her failed happiness to another. That was her generous spirit.

Ron looked overwhelmed by his good fortune. "But- where? There's nowhere good to go, like in Hogwarts with Hogsmeade. I can't take her to Madam Puddifoot's. And the only pretty places at Xaphan are outside in the snow."

"Hermione's bedroom has a balcony," Luna said thoughtfully. "If you can work around her and surprise her, I imagine she would be very gratified to find you'd gone to all that trouble for her."

"I'll have to ask Professor Flitwick for a class period off," Ron said eagerly. "Don't worry, Luna, I'll put up all the flowers for her. She won't have a choice but to think I'm romantic now!"

Draco hoped for the best for Ron, and left him and Luna examining the flowers to jog to his next class. On his way there, he passed Gilderoy in the open windy courtyard, making preparations for his castle building class. Déjà vu hit Draco like a brick. Speaking of filling rooms with flowers for your Valentine, Gilderoy had done so once for Severus, when they *hadn't* even been together. What kind of outlandishness might Gilderoy commit now without Draco to put it to a stop?

"Gilderoy!" Draco exclaimed, running up to him in the hopes of catching him before his students arrived. "Gilderoy, it's Valentine's Day!"

"Ah, yes, my favorite holiday," Gilderoy said warmly, with a wistful look. "If you think me capable of forgetting such a sublime occasion, then you do not know me as well as I thought, Draco Black!"

Draco winced. That kind of enthusiasm was exactly what Draco had been fearing. "You haven't gotten anything planned for..." Draco planted his face right up to Gilderoy's ear. "*Severus*, have you?"

"As a matter of fact, I have!" Gilderoy beamed. "I won't tell you the full details, but rest assured, it will prove romantic beyond anyone's wildest expectations-"

"Please don't tell me this is going to be a public gesture!" Draco hissed, drawing Gilderoy to the corner of the courtyard out of sight behind a gargoyle. "If you have any idea how Severus would hate that-"

"I know Severus better than that," Gilderoy said indignantly, then ruined it by continuing, "My romantic gestures will be confined to his rooms, of course, in their splendor..."

"Gilderoy," Draco said darkly, "Severus doesn't want romantic gestures! He's the least romantic person you'll ever meet!" *And besides, you said that according to him, the two of you are just having sex.*

"That's all the more reason to bring joy to his life!" Gilderoy said indignantly, and behind the gargoyle, Draco could see Gilderoy's students arriving and looking puzzled at their instructor's absence.

"Don't do it," Draco advised him with a sinking feeling. "Whatever you think is going to happen, it won't. If you try to do something romantic for Valentine's Day, Severus will hate you for it, I promise. And do you want that?"

"No," Gilderoy said, wilting. "No, I'll abstain if you're so sure. And now, for my castle building class. Hello, bright young things! I've arrived!"

Draco had to sprint to dueling class then, making it red-faced and panting just in time not to be late for Sirius. He was more rattled on the inside than outside, though, at the thought of the monstrosities Gilderoy must have planned to inflict upon his godfather. Had Gilderoy really meant it, when he'd relented and said he gave up?

Well, it was in the end their affair. Just these last classes, then Draco could stop worrying about everyone else's love lives and start worrying about his own. It would be time to see what Harry had planned, and all of his troubles would go away then, he was sure. Even the ridiculousness of all this ado about romantic gestures and presents when they were the center of the resistance to Voldemort.

Except the world wasn't that easy for him. It never was. More trouble delivered itself to him in the form of a letter Millie dropped before him on her way out of class. She was the last out, after Sirius, having been working on the letter surreptitiously while Entwhistle and Tony dueled.

Draco had tried not to be too curious about its contents, assuming it to be a romantic missive of summons or the sort to Ginny, and not some conspicuous contribution of intelligence on their side to be sent off to the Dark Lord. Millie's life wasn't any business of his anymore. Their duel together had made that perfectly clear if nothing else. So when she was trying to carry too many books and she dropped the letter right in front of him, he resisted the urge to look over its contents.

For about a split second, then he read them.

Dear Ginny,

Today is Valentine's Day, so it is only appropriate I speak of my affection for you. You are very important to me, and you mean a great deal to me, more than I can say.

However, circumstances are such that we cannot continue on in our relationship. We as people are too different to ever have entered into a romantic relationship in the first place, and we should not compound our mistake by continuing along the wrong path any longer. I hope you will understand the need for us to separate, and come in time to accept it.

Sincerely,

Millicent Bulstrode

"Give that back," Millie was saying, grabbing for it, but Draco held it out of her reach until he had read the whole thing. At first, Draco was fooled by the opening into thinking it a love note, but then the following sentences left him crashing down to earth. He was left rereading the second half of the short missive disbelievingly, like his eyes had failed him, because surely Millie couldn't be cruel enough to write a note like this on Valentine's Day. Especially one that said she and Ginny *should never have gotten together in the first place.*

"What," Draco said, "The actual fuck is this," and shook the note before her eyes.

Millie made a half-hearted grab at it, crossing her arms after she failed. "You read it."

"You're breaking it off with Ginny?" Draco gasped. "This is a serious message! You're really ending it with her?" *When she's the whole reason you chose this side in the first place*?

"It's none of your business," Millie said bitterly, "But yes, I am. There's nothing more to it. So give the note back and leave me alone."

"Oh, hell no," went Draco, practically vibrating with righteous indignation. "You are not breaking up with Ginny Weasley."

"Who are you to tell me what I should do?" Millie said darkly, and the aftermath of their duel still resonated through Draco's mind, but Draco found he had to be brave, if only through sheer frustration.

"Someone who knows you, Millie! Probably better than anyone else on this island does!" Draco exploded, though he looked around them to make sure no one was coming by the dueling classroom. "I've known you since we were children, and I know this is a mistake! What are 'circumstances' that mean you can't be together? Unless you've gone over to You-Know-Who-"

"Don't be ridiculous," Millie said roughly. "I chose my side. For better or for worse. I know there's no going back now."

"Then what the fuck is the point of this? You and Ginny make each other happy! Don't you want to be happy?"

"I don't deserve her," said Millie, and Draco whirled upon her like Dantanian Noir turned into a dragon.

"None of that! Nothing about deserving! That's the greatest bullshit in the world, I know it because I used to believe in it myself, all it means is that you're being a fucking coward-"

The words stung the former Kingsnake, as he had known they would. "I've been a miserable person to be around, ever since I found out the truth about Theo. All I've been doing is dragging her down with me. She deserves to be with someone like her, not someone like me."

"Millie," Draco said firmly, "Speaking as someone you probably consider your enemy forever, all I can tell you is that *I* think you deserve to be happy. *Before* the invasion of Hogwarts, when we don't know who'll live and who'll die, and then there will only be time for regrets of what we didn't do while we had the chance."

Millie's lips parted at the reminder of the war, looking not stunned but wounded by his line of logic, and then the door to the dueling classroom opened and shut. "Mills? Mills, it's me..."

The last person Draco wanted to see had walked into the room. "Hey, Ginny," Draco said in a strained voice, his grip upon the letter tightening. "How are you?"

"Just came to pick up Millie," Ginny said brightly, though she seemed to sense something wrong in the tableau before her. "Is everything alright?"

"Give me that," Millie snapped, finally managing to snatch the letter from Draco's grasp, and damn, Draco should have destroyed the thing while he had the chance. Yes, she could have written another letter, but that would have taken time, and she wouldn't be able to wreck everything with Ginny right before his eyes.

And then Millie threw the letter in the air and set it on fire.

Ginny made an alarmed noise, running over closer, and Millie looked at Ginny like all the stars in the galaxy shone out of her eyes. Like she was only just recognizing what she had been about to lose.

"What was that?" Ginny asked, and Millie lied as smoothly as she ever had.

"An apology letter, from Black. I'm not interested in anything he has to say."

"Okay..." Ginny said, seeming perturbed but no wiser as to the true direction of Draco and Millie's conversation. The two of them headed out hand-in-hand, until Millie stopped in the doorway.

"I, um... Ginny, I should tell you, I haven't done anything for Valentine's Day."

"That's alright," Ginny said with a grin, "I have," and the two passed out of Draco's sight.

Dinner passed by more smoothly than lunch, without any immediate goads to Harry's jealousy. Draco promised Harry his time after it, but for a mission he needed to make down to the kitchens. Luna insisted on making it with him, and he and Harry agreed they would meet up later for Valentine's Day.

Dobby had just finished his shift when they arrived, and looked overwhelmed with gratitude when they both presented him their small, shoddily-made heart-shaped Valentine's cards. Draco's read, *Always my Valentine.* Luna's read, *Dobby, let's be miserable together*!

"Luna," Draco said, shooting her a stern look at seeing her slogan unfurled. "What on earth is that message?"

"Well," Luna said logically, "I'm miserable because Neville isn't here, and Dobby is miserable because the elf he liked is dead. So I thought maybe the two of us could spend Valentine's Day together while you go off and be happy with Harry."

Draco had to try not to look at Luna like she was crazy, but Dobby seemed gratified by the sentiment. "It would be nice not to be alone on Valentine's Day," Dobby said wobblingly. "Dobby is having so many thoughts about Nissy. About things Dobby should have said and done on Valentine's Days past, if Dobby had not been being such a coward."

"Dobby, you're not a coward," Draco said instinctively, but Dobby hung his head, even after both Luna and Draco hugged him to get his spirits up. Again the confession of how Nissy had died was on the tip of Draco's tongue, and he met Luna's eyes questioningly.

She seemed to understand him, but she shook her head slightly no, and Draco lacked the nerve to go on with her disapproval. Since Wooky and Nissy were dead regardless, could it be better to just keep the truth forever from Dobby, since it could only hurt him? Was that the kindest thing to do, to preserve Dobby's faith in one of his most important friends? Or was that Draco's selfishness speaking, his desire to keep Dobby from looking at him with more loathing than he ever had in the blue loop, as the murderer of his only elf friends? Was Draco just preserving his own self?

Well, Draco had known he wasn't going to leave a good impact upon this world, even before he set Dantanian Noir loose upon it. Killing Theo had been enough to ensure he deserved his death, and Wooky and Nissy just stacked up there with the rest of the names that meant Draco would be making the world a better place when he left it.

Draco was heavy with thought as he left the kitchens and made his way to meet Harry at the observatory as they'd promised. He was not so self-absorbed, though, as to miss a bright flash of golden color going past him. It was Gilderoy Lockhart, carrying a single golden rose.

"No," Draco breathed aloud, horrified, and stood there in frozen panic before his legs took him hurtling after Gilderoy. He knew the direction Gilderoy must be heading- Severus's

rooms in the dungeons- but if he could just catch up to Gilderoy in the process and stop him from arriving at his certain doom-

Draco was not fast enough to catch Gilderoy. By the time he opened the door to Severus's chambers, Gilderoy had already been inside it for a minute, and the fatal act already accomplished.

"...remember I filled your rooms with golden roses when I taught at Hogwarts with you," Gilderoy was saying to a significantly bemused-looking Severus, and Draco held his breath.

"I remember," said Severus. "Draco and I processed the flowers for potions ingredients."

Gilderoy seemed to falter slightly at that, but then plowed on courageously, and so idiotically it seemed a miracle he was a Ravenclaw and not a Gryffindor. "But I know now that you don't like spectacle, so I thought, perhaps I should give him just one rose this Valentine's Day, to hold back from an entire room, but to show him my feelings have remained unchanged since then-"

"Gilderoy," Severus said firmly, and Draco cringed. "This is thoroughly unnecessary."

"Of course it's not necessary, that's the nature of love," Gilderoy said, puffing himself up in his omnipresent blue fur. "Love is not about necessity or duty, but about feelings."

Severus recoiled at the word *feelings*. "This gesture is ridiculous and unwanted."

As blunt as Severus was being, Gilderoy hadn't deflated. "You can say that, Severus, but you deserve a rose."

"One cannot possibly envisage what one could have done to deserve *this*," Severus deadpanned, and Gilderoy took him literally.

"Oh, it's for nothing in particular!" Gilderoy said brightly. "Just a thank you for you being you!"

Draco witnessed then the truly rare and unicorn-like sight of his godfather speechless. Gilderoy carried on as if affirmed in his words by Severus's silence. "Here you go," Gilderoy said, and pressed the rose into Severus's hand where it lay at his side, molding Severus's grip over the stem to make sure he didn't drop it. "Here is your rose, Severus."

Draco wanted to leave before the inevitable explosion, but it was like watching a train crash. He couldn't tear his eyes away.

The explosion Draco expected never came. Severus wrinkled his forehead, lifted the flower to his face, and sniffed it. "It has a pungent odor," he observed.

"So do you!" Gilderoy exclaimed rapturously, and threw himself forward to kiss Severus. And somehow, Severus didn't resist, but kissed him back, grip still holding onto the golden rose at his side.

The beach was called Far Point because it was the furthest walk, but if anything it was more of a cove, with cliffs forming a semicircle around the back of it and the beach in front of them. Draco had only been here once, when he'd accidentally Apparated too far off the mark. People talked of its beauty so much, though, it was unsurprising some intrepid Gryffindor would think to make it their place for romance in defiance of the elements. And it was beautiful, the sand entirely covered in snow pounded by heavy waves, both shimmering with the pink-gold of the sunset.

The only problem was that those elements Harry had defied looked to have had their say as well. Draco deduced there must once have been a table near the water, with two chairs, a candle, a flower, two glasses, and a bottle of wine. Now all that remained were the individual items, thrown to the ground by wind and waves, strewn across the snow soaked through with the icy cold water. All of the furniture, which must have been shoddy to begin with, had broken apart into driftwood.

"No!" Harry cried, racing over to the site of the disaster like he couldn't believe his eyes. "How could this have happened?"

Draco would have laughed if Harry didn't seem legitimately upset. The savior of the wizarding world had failed at Valentine's Day. "Guess the tide's coming in," he said soothingly, though he was pretty sure Harry had meant his question rhetorically.

"Oh my God, Draco, I'm so sorry," Harry said miserably. "I had this whole setup for you... I swear it was so romantic..."

"I'm sure it was," Draco agreed, and gave Harry a kiss on the cheek for his troubles.

Twilight was falling by the time they'd finished hauling all of the detritus of the romantic scene to the back of the beach against the cliffs. Harry kept saying how sorry he was, despite Draco telling him over and over it was fine. Once they were finished, Harry straightened up and brushed sand and snow off his hands. "I guess we should get going."

"Who says?" said Draco, and conjured one blanket, then another. "The wine still looks real enough."

Draco spread out the first blanket over the snow and sat down on it. Harry hovered above anxiously. "But the glasses are all shattered to pieces..."

Draco pulled off the cork of the bottle with his teeth, then took a straight swig from it. Burgundy wine, not bad. He could work with that.

Slowly, looking rather scandalized, Harry sank down onto the blanket beside him. Draco took the second blanket and wrapped it around their shoulders, though not without casting Focillo on it several times, turning it to a cocoon of warmth. When offered the wine, Harry initially demurred, but after his and Draco's eyes met, he grabbed it and took a long gulp of his own, grimacing. It seemed Harry wasn't grown-up enough yet to be used to the taste of wine. They sat that way for some time until a question of Harry's out of nowhere broke the silence.

"So when you became a Death Eater," Harry blurted, "Did you think you were doing the right thing? Or were you conflicted?"

Draco thought very carefully before answering. The wind was whipping right into his face as he replied, "It wasn't like that. I didn't make a choice. I mean, I didn't think there was a choice to make. I know now how wrong I was. There's always a choice. What I got was a second chance to make that choice. Not many get that privilege. None I know of do the way I did."

"And was it worth it?" Harry asked earnestly. "Your second chance?"

Draco didn't know how Harry could even ask that. "Of course it was. I got to be with you, didn't I?" He drank a large portion of the bottle right then before settling his head on Harry's shoulder.

"I just mean, you've been through so much," Harry said sadly, and cast Focillo again before wrapping the blanket around them more tightly.

Draco laughed, a short, sardonic bark. "Whatever's happened to me, I've deserved."

"I don't believe that's true," said Harry, before taking a drink and beginning to stroke Draco's hair.

Draco had no good answer to that. It seemed on some level, despite everything, Harry still saw him as an angel. The warmth from the wine was spreading through him pleasantly, in the face of the incredible cold. Maybe it was the buzz from that which loosened Draco's tongue. "Why is it, then, that you don't want me anymore?"

"What?" Harry said blankly. "Oh, you mean, why we haven't been-" Draco nodded. "Oh! That's not- Draco, it's not that I don't- want you. It's just- I don't feel like I should anymore. Or like I can."

Draco regarded him bleakly, thinking that being an ex-Death Eater must be more of a dealbreaker than Harry had been letting on. "Why?"

"Because I tried to kill you," Harry blurted, "And I almost did, when I used Sectumsempra on you. Whenever I look at you, I can't get that image out of my head of you almost dying because of me. Dragon, I- I don't feel good enough to even touch you anymore."

Draco regarded him for a moment with stunned silence, then went and finished off the bottle. "That," Draco said, lifting a finger to poke it into Harry's chest, "Is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard. Seriously? You're going to deprive yourself because of what, something another you did, in a world that doesn't even exist anymore?"

Harry flushed darker, from more than just the booze and cold now. "I know it sounds foolish-
"

"Because it is foolish," Draco interrupted, "Because all I ever want is for you to touch me, and I can't wait for it any longer-"

Then, miraculously, Harry cupped Draco's face and leaned in close. "Is this okay?" he whispered. "You feel so cold."

"Then make me warm," Draco whispered back, and Harry kissed him long and slow and melting hot there in the snow. Draco was left panting after, and he really must have been a little drunk, because of how just one kiss had his mind reeling.

"Like that?" Harry said shyly once they parted, and Draco nodded vigorously.

"Yes, that's perfect," Draco said dreamily, and leaned into the next dizzying kiss, dying for more of Harry's warmth. They kissed and kissed while the twilight turned to dusk and threatened to arrive at night.

Finally, once Draco's hands had wandered one too many times under the blanket, Harry broke off, flustered, saying, "It's getting late, we should be heading up to our room," and Draco was only too happy to agree. They raced there in record time, and then Harry gave Draco exactly what he wanted.

So ended, Draco thought, his last ever Valentine's Day with Harry Potter.

When Draco entered the Great Hall the next day, it was all abuzz with whispering and stolen glances, and many of them snapped to Draco once he was there. Draco ascended to the high table with no idea as to what had caused this commotion, only for Hermione to drag him into his chair and say in his ear, "This couldn't possibly have been you, could it, Frankenstein?"

"If it's something last night, I was with Harry the whole time," Draco said, perhaps with too much contentment in his voice. "You can ask him."

"People think it might have been you," Hermione said with a sigh. "Which of course I know to be ridiculous, but no one can work out who else on our side could possibly have done something so horrible... they're calling it the Valentine's Day Murder..."

Draco picked up the morning's issue of the Daily Prophet from Ron's place and stared at the front cover. It did indeed have VALENTINE'S DAY MURDER emblazoned across the byline, but what took Draco's breath away was the picture beneath the lurid headline.

"See, they can't show the picture of the body, it's supposed to be too graphic," Ron said, coming in from the side and plopping down in his seat. "Burned alive and all, they're saying. And right in the heart of the Ministry offices."

Draco rubbed his eyes twice to make sure they didn't deceive him, but what they showed him was the same. The picture of the victim was of Dolores Umbridge.

The Deluminator

Chapter Notes

Playlist

"Corban Yaxley," Sirius announced, throwing down the copy of the Daily Prophet, which had further coverage of Umbridge's murder, and speculation linking it to her former student Undesirable No. 1 Harry Potter. "They'll let out about Umbridge, but one of their own? It's nowhere in the paper."

"What are you talking about?" Ron said with a stretch and yawn, only to go alert at Hermione's severe look. "Who's Corban Yaxley?"

"He was the Death Eater in charge of running the Ministry of Magic," Remus said quietly, looking more disturbed than one might have expected. "And now our sources in the Ministry tell us his corpse was found in the new Ministry fountain, with the fountain as well as the body defaced by fire."

"I swear it wasn't me," Draco said, popping his head up from his porridge, but didn't earn any laughs.

"Oh, Draco, we know," Remus said heavily. "The question is who could be doing this. This isn't our methods. It's not how the Order of the Phoenix fights. This is terrible."

"If you ask me," Ron said defiantly, "Seeing what they've been doing at the Ministry, to the Muggleborns and all that, he deserved it just as bad as Umbridge did."

Severus spoke for once in such a discussion, such a rare intrusion it must have been pressing on his mind. "Speaking as someone quite familiar with Yaxley during the First Wizarding War, it is certain that he did commit many worse acts himself."

"We can't let that kind of thinking define us," Remus said with a sad look. "We are different from the enemy because we do not believe in wholesale slaughter. We seek to end the war with our enemies removed to prison where they belong, not dead."

"Except You-Know-Who," Harry said quietly, and Remus couldn't argue with that.

"Except for You-Know-Who," Remus conceded. "But even going against a Death Eater cannot be the license for such butchery. And it must have been done with considerable malice."

"You mean," Sirius said with a bark of laughter, which Remus didn't seem to appreciate, "Because of what they say about the Dark Mark?"

"What do they say?" Hermione asked eagerly, nearly upsetting her breakfast in her fervor leaning forward to hear.

Sirius spoke his next words quietly. "Word is that the Dark Mark was the target of special force. The thing was burned clear off his arm. Nothing but burnt flesh and bone left where it had used to be."

"That's brilliant," said Ron, with a grin at Sirius.

"That's awful!" said Hermione, with a commiserating look with Remus.

"I think I know who did this," Draco said, or almost said, but something held back the words from his lips. Harry was looking at him directly, and that kept the admission back out of some bizarre sense of shame, because even if Draco hadn't been the one to kill Yaxley, he might as well have been.

Draco hadn't meant to go somewhere dangerous alone again, he really hadn't. It was just that everyone else was busy. Hermione was leading a study session for a great mass of squirmy first-years, Ron was off helping Fred and George with something, and Harry had been drafted in as a last minute Seeker replacement for a friendly before the huge Gryffindor-Hufflepuff match at Xaphan. And Luna? She had been down chatting with Dobby in the kitchens about Neville in a way Draco hadn't had the heart to interrupt. Nor did he have, he found, the heart to take her near something so dangerously seductive.

That left him and just him, although really if he'd been trying, he could have insisted on it and brought *some* of the others- or even smarter, brought Sirius and Remus or Severus along-

But, as Draco Apparated away from Xaphan on that blustery day, he did so alone. Where he arrived was even more blustery, as the white snow-covered cliffs leant no protection against the sea wind. Draco adjusted his white fur around himself before walking forward and tapping the talon wand against where two cliffs met.

"Olympia Par Manet."

The entrance swung open to reveal the ever-enchanting, ever-threatening form of Dantanian Noir, dressed all in black.

A century old, and yet only twenty. There he was, so beautiful it could break a heart.

"Little dragon," Dantanian said warmly, standing right at the door, clearly having been waiting for him. "What a pleasure it is to see you again."

But not a surprise. "You knew I was there?" Draco asked guardedly, that one step warier of the man before him.

"Of course," Dantanian said with a hint of his musical laugh. "I could feel you out there through our connection. Isn't that how you found me here?"

Draco's mind swarmed with interpretations of that, all of them fearful. "No. I just guessed you might pick here as a hideaway. Especially if you wanted me to find you. What do you mean, our connection?"

"Don't fret," Dantanian said soothingly, large dark eyes eerily fixed on Draco's. "It's only natural. Did you really think, just because the ritual made me separate from you, the bond of magic between us would be so easily rent asunder?"

"No, I don't feel any connection," Draco said, and Dantanian took Draco's hand and brought it up to his chest, pressing it there.

"Can you feel it now?" Dantanian asked mysteriously.

"No," Draco said crossly, "I can just feel your chest," and Dantanian's pretty laugh echoed out from under Draco's hand. Draco dropped it quickly, feeling his face heat. It seemed inevitable that any meeting between the two of them would begin with Draco at a loss.

"How can I help you, Draco?" Dantanian asked, stepping aside to let Draco into his horde of millunas. Seeing Dantanian haloed around by so many moonstones- read, potential instruments for dark rituals- was hardly reassuring.

Draco took a deep breath, telling himself he had a right to ask these things, and anyway, Dantanian had said he would never hurt him. "Where have you been? You shouldn't have just left like that."

"Perhaps you are right," Dantanian said thoughtfully. He withdrew from his pocket the Mirror of Espilce. The shards had been glued into place, but the mirror was still clearly not restored. "I had no luck in my primary purpose. I traveled the world searching out answers. I spent some time in Cathedral Reserve, the site of the- but this is of little matter. What I must confess of the task I took on for you, my love, is that I failed you."

"That's, er, alright," Draco said fumblingly, thrown in the face of Dantanian's consistent intensity before him, like some chivalrous knight from a storybook. Well, the mass-murdering kind.

Draco fidgeted where he stood, until at last he brought himself to blurt out, "Did you kill Dolores Umbridge?"

"The head of the Muggleborn Registration Commission? Yes," Dantanian said, cool as you like, "I killed her."

Draco couldn't hold back the shiver that permeated through his limbs then. "Why?"

"What she was doing was evil," Dantanian said patiently. "She was evil, so I killed her. Oh, Draco, you need not look so stricken. She was an enemy of yours, was she not?"

An enemy of Draco's, Dantanian said, like a cat proudly bringing a dead mouse it had killed to show its owner.

"Not like that! I never wanted for her to die!"

"And yet she deserved death," Dantanian said, as if that resolved the matter then and there. "Yaxley, you cannot say he was not your enemy."

Draco had no idea how to reason against this perfectly composed, seemingly logical bloodthirstiness. "Why did you burn off his Dark Mark?"

"Oh, that?" Dantanian said, with a carelessly imperious wave of his pale hand. "That was a message to the Dark Lord, that there are powers stronger than him in this world."

"You believe yourself more powerful than the Dark Lord?" Draco asked disbelievingly.

Dantanian pushed a strand of Draco's hair behind his ear before saying, "Yes, my love. Yes, I do."

Draco could feel tears of sheer frustration at the back of his eyes, just from trying to reason with this affectionate killer. "Then why did you ever leave my side, if you're that powerful? Shouldn't you have stayed to protect me?"

"Oh, but my darling," Dantanian said fondly, "You are powerful too."

"Don't leave me again!" Draco insisted, stomping his foot as he fought back his tears of vexation. "Never again!"

"And I take it," Dantanian said, "Only kill those you say you wish killed?" Draco nodded sullenly, and Dantanian leaned forward and kissed Draco on the forehead. Draco inhaled sharply. Part of him had expected Dantanian to smell like blood, but he still smelled of exotic flowers.

Something buzzed and went hot in Draco's pocket. He fished out the Dumbledore's Army coin and saw written in an untidy scrawl, *Crisis, come quickly.* "I have to go," Draco blurted, and Dantanian looked a little disappointed, but not surprised.

"You know where to find me," he said mildly, before Draco Apparated away to Xaphan.

"Where have you been?" was the first thing Hermione said to him when he found her, catching him by the arm and pulling him along.

"I'll tell you later," Draco said, glancing up and down the hall, where members of the Order were gathering. "What's going on?"

"Oh, it's terrible, it's too terrible," Hermione said, pulling back to wring her hands together as they entered the medical bay. "It's Death Eaters, they've taken Fred and George..."

"And Ron?" Draco gasped, only to turn the corner and come face to face with a bandaged Ron, whose face was covered in blood. Hermione didn't hesitate before flinging her arms around him, and Ron didn't protest.

"You were with them, weren't you?" Draco asked, and Ron pulled back from Hermione to give a guilty nod.

"We were at their old store- you know, Weasley's Wizard Wheezes- to pick up some old inventory. And they must have been keeping a watch on it, because suddenly there was five or six Death Eaters there. They surprised us. They knocked out George right away, and I thought the best thing I could do was Apparate back here and bring help. But by the time I did, Fred and George were gone, and the Death Eaters with them."

"We've got to move fast," Draco said fretfully. "Before they take them somewhere like Hogwarts where we can't just go get them back." This was a living nightmare. It was like Neville all over again.

"If the Death Eaters even want them alive," Ron said with a shudder. "They kept saying this was 'payback' for Yaxley-"

"Oh, Ron, I'm sure they haven't killed them," Hermione said, with the word *yet* left unspoken. It was hanging over all three of them, the memory of what had happened to Fred in the blue loop.

Harry crossed the room from where he'd been in close conversation with Arthur and Molly Weasley. "If only we knew where to go. Ron, are you sure you didn't hear them say anything about-"

"No, for the thousandth time no," Ron said fervently, only to stop and say, "Wait, did you hear that?"

The noise, it turned out, was muffled because it was coming from Ron's pocket. It came from Ron's, gift from Dumbledore, his Deluminator, which heretofore had seemed like an afterthought bit of rubbish for poor Ron. But now it let out the defiant sound of Fred Weasley's voice, saying, "Ron Weasley? Not with us, chap. Don't even know who that is."

"What is that?" Hermione asked, and an odd feeling filled Draco, but no one said anything, until Luna, who had gotten into the room unnoticed, said,

"Try clicking it."

All the light in the room went out, leading to shock and mutinous murmurs, but light appeared in the hallway, a ball of pulsing bluish brightness. "Go after it!" Luna said excitedly, and the five of them clambered up and followed.

Ron was the first to it, watching it move as it began to float down the hallway. "What are we doing?" Draco asked, embarrassed, and Luna shushed him.

"There has to be some reason Dumbledore gave Ron the Deluminator," she whispered, "And that was Fred Weasley's voice. Let's see what happens."

They rounded the end of the hall and then suddenly the light bobbed forward, floating towards Ron at breakneck pace. Hermione started back, startled, while Harry tried to lunge

forward and push Ron out of the way, but both of them were unnecessary. The light passed into Ron and stayed there, right in his chest, no longer visible to them, but Ron didn't seem hurt. Quite the contrary. His eyes opened wider, and he said, "Feel, it's hot."

They all reached out and felt Ron's chest, and there was nothing there. "No, it's hot," Ron insisted. "And it- it's telling me where to go. It can take me to Fred and George."

"Are you serious?" Harry said incredulously, but Luna was already kicking into high gear, calling people from all around saying that Ron had figured out where his brothers were and they had to go, *now.*

"That must be what the Deluminator does," Hermione said softly, taking Ron's hand as Draco and Harry began to call out to people too. "It takes you to where your heart desires most."

"So that's why Dumbledore gave me the Deluminator," Ron said miserably. "Because he knew I'd abandon the people I loved."

"Or," Harry said, "He knew you'd want to fight to get them back. Ron, you know where to go?"

"I do," said Ron, face hardening, and Side-Alonged the first load of people, which was Harry, Draco, Hermione, and Ron's parents. A second later he disappeared and reappeared with Sirius, Remus, Severus, and Luna, before going back again and again for more. Soon the area outside a great mansion was filled with members of the Order, raring to go to save two of their own.

"Where are we?" Hermione said, taking in the foreboding twilight sight of snow heaping over overgrown ivy curling over cold stone walls. But even with it in this state of disrepair with its master missing, Draco could never have mistaken where they were.

"This is Nott Manor," said Draco. "Everyone, come over here! I know this place."

They entered Nott Manor as quietly as they could, skulking in through the side entrance in pairs, but it still wasn't enough to keep from attracting the attention of the Death Eaters there, who seemed to have multiplied in number since Ron first saw them at the Weasleys' store. Curses flew down at them from the central staircase as soon as they arrived in the foyer, caught by Sirius's hastily thrown-up shield.

"Divide up!" Sirius yelled. "We don't know where they're keeping the boys, and we don't want them to kill them before we can get to them!"

They all hastily obeyed, with Severus and Draco left the task of forcing their way up the stairs together. They raced up them underneath their formidable shields, before advancing on the trio of Macnair, Jugson, and Dolohov who had been sharp-shooting downwards at the Order.

Dolohov shot out his trademark purple zigzag curse at Severus, who nimbly leaped aside from it, but at the expense of hitting a nearby upholstered chair and coming crashing down with it. Draco leaped out to stand in the way of Severus while he got up and blocked a blue light from Jugson that nearly sent him flying off the landing- it felt like it must have been Expulso, such a favorite of Sirius's students.

And then the battle broke out in force between the five of them, with Dolohov's presence sending Draco's heart racing with something he was unfamiliar with these days: pure unadulterated fear...

Except *not* unadulterated. It came with the thought: *Dolohov kills Remus. Is this my only chance to stop him, by killing him now?*

He might have tried, if not for Severus beside him, ever the arbiter of what was righteous for Draco to do- in spite of Severus's dark past, or perhaps because of it. Draco considered shooting Sectumsempra at Dolohov, then hesitated, and the moment of doubt gave Macnair the chance to hit Draco with Expelliarmus.

Draco relaxed, expecting the wand to scald Macnair's hand and maybe even come flying back to him, but of course, it didn't. Dantanian was no longer inside the talon wand. It was just a wand now- a very powerful wand, but still a wand, and Draco was left defenseless without it.

Dolohov cackled at the sight, only for Severus to shoot red light at him, and the two of them to advance sideways, two master duelists caught in mortal combat. That left Draco faced wandless with Jugson and Macnair. Draco tried to call upon his pyromancy from a nearby torch to flare out and scald them, but that didn't work either. Apparently Dantanian had been all the pyromancy inside him. It almost made him regret he hadn't burned more people with it while he still could.

"We need help up here!" Draco yelled, dropping to the ground to avoid Jugson and Macnair's Stunners, and incredibly, someone replied to his plea, someone who had been hanging back from the rest, not getting involved in the smaller duels breaking out around Nott Manor. Unfortunately, it was the last person Draco would ever want to put in danger, hurtling up towards it by his behest.

"I'm coming, cousin! I'm coming to save you!" Luna yelled heroically, and the two Death Eaters on Draco turned their wands downwards to hit the sitting duck that was awaiting them. Draco let out a frustrated cry and flung himself bodily upon the sizable form of Jugson, who was sent stumbling and falling into the skinnier, mustached Macnair.

Luna made it to the top of the stairs unhurt, and her keen eyes caught the sight of the talon wand escaping Macnair's pocket and rolling back down the stairs. Draco would have sprung for it, but he didn't want to leave Luna alone with these two men he had grown to know too well at Malfoy Manor in the blue loop.

"Give me your wand and get mine!" Draco barked to her, and she moved to obey, only for Draco to remember what happened when he betrayed the talon wand by using other ones. "No, stop, don't! Protego, Luna!"

Luna just managed to get up a shield before them at the spells shot their way by Jugson and Macnair, but the impact sent both her and Draco tumbling down the stairs. Draco snagged the talon wand and took it back.

They couldn't get back up the stairs, even with the two of them, not with Jugson and Macnair holding the high ground and ready for them. The spells they sent up and down at each other reflected off each other's, keeping them at stalemate. "I don't think Fred and George are up there!" Luna yelled, and Draco shook his head.

"My godfather is," he screamed, "With Dolohov," and just the sound of that made their foes laugh eerily, grasping as well as Draco did what a death sentence combat with Dolohov could be.

Finally, though, at that encouragement, Luna managed to catch Macnair with Verniculpa, and the wand slipped out of his hand as he screamed in abject terror, not accustomed to that curse of Dantanian's. Luna picked it up and wielded it in her second hand, shooting Stunners with both as they ganged up on Jugson. Jugson shielded and tried to run, only to collide with Macnair, and the two came tumbling towards them. Draco raised his wand to Stun them and end this-

Only for that telltale purple light to erupt from the direction of Dolohov and Severus, and make Luna and Draco duck instead. "Get up, you useless worms, or you will see what the Dark Lord thinks of your performance!" Dolohov howled.

Severus was standing apart from Dolohov, breathing hard, looking sweaty and exhausted, and for the first time since hearing of Nagini ripping Severus apart, Draco almost feared Severus had met someone who was more than his equal. Then Severus hit Dolohov with Everte statum, sending the Death Eater flying, and Macnair lunged at Luna for his wand while Jugson screamed, "Avada Kedavra!"

That green light was headed at Draco, and Draco just managed to pull the fallen chair in between the two of them to block it away. "Are you an idiot?" Draco screamed at Jugson. "Do you want me to kill you?" It was looking increasingly tempting, because what was he thinking, trying that with Draco Black? Trying it so near to Luna?

Luna screamed, not because of the curse, but because she had kept the wand back from Macnair, yet Macnair's flailing had succeeded in punching her in the face, hard. She crumpled to the ground only to rear up, plant both wands into Macnair's solar plexus, and hit him with Stupefy so hard he went flying and hit the wall near Jugson, disrupting the huge man's next attempt at killing Draco.

Luna lunged forward to meet Jugson and help Draco, but Draco was so afraid Jugson would try the Killing curse on her, he knew he had to end this now. Behind them, he could see Dolohov being whipped around through the air by his godfather, as he cast Sectilis Procella and made Jugson recoil at the tiny arrow points being driven into him drawing blood. That hesitation from Jugson was all Draco needed to get inside his defenses and cast Stupefy, sending him into a heap with his compatriot Macnair.

Draco whirled to help Severus with Dolohov at the same time as Dolohov went flying over the banister and down to the first floor. Severus was immediately taking Draco by the arm and dragging him downwards, what Draco thought was after Dolohov, and Draco asked in a vicious voice, "Shall I kill him?"

Severus slapped Draco across the face. "Did you hear nothing of what Lupin said at breakfast this morning? *That is not us!* Come, Draco, Sirius is right, we must find the Weasley boys, *now*, if they are going to survive this, and this all is not to have been for nothing-"

"Don't hit him!" Luna protested, nearly tripping over Dolohov, and making a satisfying breaking sound as her shoe impacted his fallen face. Draco had to be content to do the same thing on purpose as he passed Dolohov, wondering if he would regret this mercy as they raced into another hallway, running towards and not away from the sounds of further battle.

They passed by the huge blond figure of Rowle retreating from those sounds, running as fast as his sizable frame could from whatever combat was going on.

"Thorfinn, I have used the Dark Mark to call upon more of our compatriots!" Rookwood was calling after him, that pockmarked face still intent on battle.

Rowle howled back, "Then I'll be waiting for them elsewhere!" and had his cowardice rewarded by three Stunners to the face- four, if one counted Luna still wielding Macnair's stolen, bloodied wand as her second one. Rookwood retreated in panic then too at the sight, running backwards towards the dining room where there was shouting and screaming...

The others had made it to the dining room without them, as had the remaining Death Eaters. The Order were all on one side of Cantankerous Nott's great mahogany table, and the Death Eaters on the other- sorely outnumbered, but surely only for a time if Rookwood really had called reinforcements. The dining room where Nott had held such sumptuous dinner parties, expertly paired with wines by himself as sommelier, had become a battleground with the two Weasley twins held captive as collateral.

The unconscious George dangled from the grasp of ugly black-haired Selwyn, while tall grey-haired Travers held a struggling, colossally pissed off-looking Fred, whose attempts to squirm his way free were curtailed by the presence of a wand jabbing right into his throat. The hostage-taking seemed to have proven successful, as despite the Order's superior numbers, the Death Eaters remained on their side of the table untouched.

"Just try it!" Avery was yowling beside them, brandishing his wand as if anyone found him threatening. "Just try and get us, and both of these little blood traitors will meet their deserved end!"

"Fred!" Molly Weasley yelled, "Fred, don't worry, we'll get you out of there," and Fred cast them all a roguish grin across the table. His face was swollen and beaten within an inch of his life, with a helpless trembling to his lanky form that suggested the Cruciatus curse had been used on him, but his caustic heartiness was undaunted.

"Never doubted it for a second, Mum!" Fred called out, and Travers slammed Fred's head down over the table. Several of the Order cried out, but no one made a move to stop him. It

was difficult to see how they would ever get a shot, on not one but both of them from this angle, in time to save both Weasleys from their threatened fate.

"Your mother will watch you die tonight!" Travers yelled, which seemed unlikely given that Fred was his only ticket out of being Stunned to kingdom come.

Rookwood was more business-like. "Put down your wands, or we will kill the first, and let Travers decide what to do with the second."

None of the Order moved to put down their wands, but there were exchanged glances. "Enough with this foolishness," Severus barked roughly. "Augustus, you are defeated. Yield and you will survive this night. Continue this inane posturing and you may find the Order of the Phoenix less inclined towards mercy."

Severus was only bluffing, to judge by the stance he had taken on killing near the staircase, but the Death Eaters didn't know that. Draco could see it shake all four of them, and then a wild resolution set in Travers's eyes. "Very well," Travers said miserably. "If we are dead regardless, let us take these blood traitors along with us! Avada-"

All of the torches in the dining room flared, then one of them shot its flame out to catch Travers's wand hand in the process of casting. Travers dropped his wand and Fred both, shrieking inhumanly as he clawed at his burnt hand, and fire tore out at the same time in a ball of light with a mind of its own, slamming into Selwyn's grasp on George and sending Selwyn hurtling to the floor with the impact.

A great wave of fire came up upon the Death Eaters then, from nowhere any of them could see, as Rookwood screamed to flee, and him and Avery managed to fling themselves over the table and past the wall of Order members in the chaos, down the hall and into the night. They had fled so abjectly at the merest sign of what now descended upon Travers and Selwyn's felled forms, a rope of fire pinning them to the ground and tying them down.

Some instinct made Draco look up, and there, in Cantankerous Nott's highest stained glass window he saw him, only half of the window punched in, so uncanny reflections of blue and green swam over his face in the moonlight...

There was Dantanian Noir, directing the fire below them, until he nimbly jumped down from the window onto the table to take the fire rope in his hand himself.

"What would you have me do with them?" Dantanian asked Fred, with a voice and air that presaged death, but Fred just gazed in shock at the new presence there, unable to process who had been his savior.

"Who *are* you?" Fred breathed, stunned and enraptured, and Dantanian tossed back his long black braid, clad in a new set of silver robes shimmering in the firelight.

"My name," Dantanian said, offering him a hand, "Is Daniel Shaw."

Daniel Shaw

Chapter Notes

Playlist

"The man who saved our lives is named Daniel Shaw," Fred told his twin excitedly, "But his full name is Daniel Terrence Shaw, so he goes by Dante. Isn't that the coolest name?"

"Whoa, slow down," said George, rubbing his eyes. "I know some strange wizard showed up shooting fire to save us. That part I've got down. Who the fuck he is, that's what I'm wondering."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you!" Fred said, while Draco listened in surreptitiously with a growing sense of wonder. "Dante's a painter. He was born in England, but he was raised in France, and he went to Beauxbatons. He picked his nickname to sound more continental-"

"Do we need his entire life story?" George grumbled. "I mean why he came up in there and decided to save our sorry asses, Fred. The rest you can leave out."

"You're just grumpy because you were knocked out and I got to see the whole thing," Fred said chipperly, as if the fact that being awake had subjected him to the Cruciatus curse didn't much matter, compared to the splendor of what he'd gotten to witness. "Anyway, Dante still cared about his birthplace, so when he heard about the Death Eaters remaining in power this long, he decided to return to England and join the fight against them-"

"And kill Umbridge and Yaxley, I take it," George yawned. "Bloke's good with fire, you said."

"No!" Fred exclaimed, looking mortally offended. "He gave us his solemn word he had nothing to do with those deaths, and I believe him!"

"Sure," George said, starting to look amused by his twin's newfound, unlikely devotion. "And how exactly did he manage to show up and save us at exactly the right point?"

"He'd been staking out that Death Eater hideout for weeks," Fred said breathlessly, "Waiting for the right moment to strike, but he couldn't do it alone. So when the Order attacked, he saw his chance, and went around the back. It's that simple, George, you really don't need to make so many faces."

"This is my normal face," said George, and the two bickered amicably from then on. Draco slipped out of the medical bay and decided he would be remiss to end the night without stepping in upon Xaphan's new hero.

His steps took him to the guest wing where many fugitives resided, to an ordinary corridor with an ordinary room that just happened to now house the most extraordinary wizard ever to set foot on Xaphan. To Draco's surprise, he found Dantanian settling in by unpacking a satchel full of clothes and possessions. "Where did you get all that?"

"I did need some apparel and such for my travels," Dantanian said vaguely, though his face had lit up in a way hard to conceal when he saw Draco. "Is my new minder worried about how I'm settling in?"

"I'm not your minder," Draco said in annoyance, crossing his arms against Dante's half-lidded, dark-eyed insinuation. "Whatever that means. I'm just the cover for how you know everywhere to go at Xaphan. Severus knew you'd need one."

"Ah," Dantanian said silkily, "Given the way he looked at me, he was one of the few of the authorities here who knew more about me than my cover story." Draco didn't bother to deny it. Dantanian knew him too well not to think he'd go running to Severus when something went wrong. "So he knows the full truth. That I am Dantanian Noir, phantom of nightmares."

Draco could hear the humor in Dantanian's voice, but chose to ignore it. Dantanian could hardly realistically downplay the threat he did pose to whoever was unfortunate enough to be around him. "And Sirius and Remus know. And I'm sure Severus will slip a word or two in the ears of McGonagall and some other important people. Just enough to let them know you aren't everything you claim to be. I mean, come on, anyone with a brain has to at least guess you with all your fire stuff killed Umbridge and Yaxley..."

Dantanian's pretty face had flashed with annoyance at the sound of his cover being wrecked, but he smiled at Draco again after his last words. "They can think as they like, as long as I am not separated from you again."

Draco found himself flustered by Dantanian's intensity, like he often was. "What is your purpose here at Xaphan?"

"Did I not just tell you? To be near you, so you can satisfy yourself I am not up to any mischief, as well as to have you near me, so I can continue to protect you as you yourself demanded I do."

"You'll stay away from my mother? You know she's here, for asylum. You won't hurt her?" Draco asked, and Dantanian nodded. "Do you intend to help us with the assault upon Hogwarts?"

"Are you asking me to?" Dantanian said, sounding delighted. "Am I not too much of a... what would you say... loose cannon for you to consider?"

"You can turn into a dragon," Draco said tightly, "So I'm asking."

Which was Draco's way of saying he wasn't sure if Dantanian was the most powerful wizard on the island, if not in Britain- maybe he was, to at least one of those propositions- but he

was clearly powerful enough that having him on their side could turn the balance of victory and defeat. So they needed him with them when the time came, even if it made Draco the one for once to have to do some dragon taming.

"Then I'm accepting," Dantanian said, spreading his arms wide in his usual gesture of perfect innocence. "Can you imagine a situation where you put yourself in peril that I will not be there, doing my best to keep a beautiful hair on your beautiful head from being harmed?"

Draco flushed deeply. "Why do you say things like that, Dantanian?" he complained, and received nothing but an elegant shrug.

"Call me Dante," Dantanian said sweetly. "Everyone else will now, and anyway, that's what my mother called me."

Draco struggled to get back around to the point. "Why *are* you so devoted to me, Dantanian-"

"It's Dante now-"

"Fine, then, Dante! Why are you so dedicated to aiding me and protecting me?"

Dante gave another one of his consummately lovely shrugs, before tossing his long braid over his shoulder in a motion like a whip. It reminded Draco of the fire whips Dante had shot out at the Death Eaters earlier tonight. "I have been with you all the time, everyday, constantly, since you picked up the talon wand, Draco. Can you not expect some attachment to have formed?"

"You were with Aunt Bella like that," Draco said, refusing to be distracted, "And you've eaten her alive. What makes me different? Is it that I remind you of Dorian Malfoy?"

Dante's expression shifted, the minutest change that still had the power to set Draco's spine stiff and send all his fight or flight instincts into gear. "I would kindly prefer it, my love, if you never speak of Dorian Malfoy again."

Still Draco proceeded. "You loved him, didn't you? That's why you left him those memories, which I've seen, of the two of you, and-"

"I told you," Dante said coldly, "Never to speak of him," and in a second, Draco's back hit the stone wall of Dante's room, and Dante's pretty pale hand had encircled his throat.

They stared at each other in that position for some time, Dante's hand not squeezing down but remaining in place, a reminder of what Dante could do to him if he wished. That Dante had the power to crush Draco if he ever changed his mind about his limitless fount of affection towards him. That Dante had the power to crush anyone and anything, and Draco had invited a viper into their nest.

Draco found he was breathing hard and his heart was pounding in his ears by the time Dante released him. He hadn't made a move to get out of Dante's clutches. He wasn't sure what Dante would have done if he had tried.

"Please, little dragon," Dante said after some length of time, seeming to force his usual lovely smile onto his unnatural doll face. "Forgive my lapse in patience. I remain, as always, your devoted servant."

Draco tried not to reach out and rub his neck, which, after all, he could tell Dante hadn't bruised, just touched. And there was nothing wrong, was there, with Dante touching his throat, not with how close they had been with Dante inside his wand. Maybe Dante just liked touching him, in caress or in threat.

"See you remain that way," Draco said, trying for imperiousness, but must have failed from the fond rather than intimidated look that came onto Dante's face then.

"I will," Dante said with mock-solemnity, back with his affectionate face on, and when Draco glared at him, he flashed him an irresistible smile.

"Where have you been?" were the sleepy words Harry spoke to him as Draco finished changing and eased into their bed, very late that night. Sliding into a cocoon of Harry's warmth was ideal after the ordeal that dealing with Dante had been, and he didn't really feel like talking, just sleeping, but he obliged Harry.

"Looking after Dante," Draco said drowsily, and Harry sat up in bed, fumbling for his glasses. Draco got them for him, slightly warily.

"Who's Dante?"

"Dantanian," Draco said, and couldn't miss the dark look that crossed Harry's face at the name. "That's what he wants everyone to call him now, Dante."

"And you'll call him that?" Harry complained, with a hitch to his voice that Draco hoped he wasn't hearing right.

"Better than wrecking his cover somewhere before we want to," Draco said carefully, and Harry tossed aside one of the pillows, looking agitated.

"I don't understand why they've let him stay here on Xaphan, anyway," Harry sighed, and Draco reached out and tried for an ill-timed kiss, which Harry rebuffed with little effort. Draco had to answer the question.

"Because having him here on Xaphan where we can watch what he's doing is better than having him out on the loose burning the rest of Britain's populace alive?" Draco said, with a hint of levity that Harry did not seem to take well.

"We don't know how he came back to life," Harry said heatedly, "We don't know a thing about him, if he's even human-"

"Oh, I think he's human," Draco said, remembering the dark light in Dante's eyes when he had pressed him against the wall by the throat.

"How can you be sure? Don't be so casual when it comes to him! I'm worried about you!" Harry exploded, and Draco realized several steps behind, oh, they were actually having a fight, and at this hour.

"Harry," Draco sighed breathily, trying to wheedle his way back into Harry's good graces. "I promise I'll be careful, alright?"

It was hard to explain the part of him that felt like he did know Dante, after all those years with Dante in his wand like the man had said, and like Dante was right that there was an unseverable connection between them, however tenuous Dante's temper could be. No, Harry wouldn't understand that.

"I'm just trying to do what's best for the Order. To make sure we defeat You-Know-Who when the time comes."

"And he's essential for that now?" Harry said unhappily, and Draco told him what he didn't want to hear.

He remembered, from the Pensieve vial, that Dante had said he claimed Xaphan as his own, and when asked by what right, he had responded, *Power*.

"I think so."

It was true that Dante wasn't completely happy with Draco, and not merely for having persisted in referencing his old flame Dorian. He expressed as much when he joined Draco in the observatory, and began to wax philosophical about how foolish they had been, just fleeing Nott Manor and leaving the felled Death Eaters alive.

Dante was, predictably, in favor of having killed every one of their enemies when they had the chance, and seeing his unnatural fervor for bloodshed made Draco guilty he too had expressed an opinion like that when it came to Dolohov.

"It just doesn't work that way with our side," Draco said cautiously, watching the blood rise in Dante's pale face as he worked himself up over their side's foolishness. "We didn't have time to round them all up and take them captive, either, before we could be sure the reinforcements wouldn't arrive-"

"There would have been time to kill them-"

"You know, Dante, much more talk like that, and your cover of sweet little painter Daniel Shaw isn't going to hold up much longer," Draco jibed, and received an offended look. "Anyway, if we want to get into the sanctum, let's see if it responds to you anymore-"

"Dignusanguine," Dante said, and the sanctum doors sprang open for him. After glancing around quickly to be sure no one could see them, Draco followed him inside. The glow of the moonstone illuminated Dante's pale skin so thoroughly, it seemed to shine through it and

make him almost a ghost, possessed by the moonstone itself. It was not the pleasantest sight for a clement Thursday evening.

Draco found himself unhappy another could enter the place that had used to be only his, but he hardly wanted to express that to Dante, who seemed pensive about their discussion of killing. "Look, Dante," Draco said as they walked further into the sanctum, "Every time I've had the chance to show someone mercy and I've killed them, I've regretted it afterwards."

"Karkaroff?" Dante countered silkily, stroking his hands on either side over the moonstones on the wall as they walked. "You seem torn up with regret about that choice. Pettigrew? Grindelwald? No, my love, you are only thinking of Theodore Nott."

"Maybe I don't like it if you bring up *that* name around me, either," Draco said huffily, feeling his point dismantled. Dante flashed him a grin, all bared pearly teeth, before returning to the sight before him: the Mirror of Erised.

"What do you see in there?" Draco asked curiously. "Is it still just flame?"

"There's no telling," Dante said smoothly, though of course he could just tell Draco if he wanted, and led Draco around the obelisk to the Mirror of Ecidyrue. He reached out and traced the inscription on it, making Draco's insides hum with disquiet. Dante was always saying or doing something that made Draco's skin crawl or breath quicken.

"Here we go," Dante said finally, taking the mended Mirror of Espilce out of his pocket and sliding it into the small empty socket for it in the obelisk. "There they are. The three mirrors, together again at last."

"Except the Mirror of Espilce is still wrecked," Draco sulked, "So this all might as well just be useless metal-"

"I'm sorry, my darling," Dante said soothingly, taking Draco by the shoulders. He and Draco were about the same height, like mirror images themselves, light and dark. "I did try to restore it, I promise you."

"That's alright," Draco sighed. "I don't know what we could have done if it was restored."

"Something magnificent, to be sure," Dante said, and Draco grinned reluctantly back at him. But then-

"Perhaps we could have killed those Death Eaters when we had the chance," Dante said apropos of nothing, and the cycle began again.

Harry didn't seem happy that night, when Draco arrived late to bed again admitting he'd been once more with Dante. He didn't voice it this time, just seemed to stew over it in a way that was more dangerous.

The trouble started when Dante came to watch Draco's last class of the day. Sirius wasn't exactly happy about the intrusion, but with all of the students excited to have Dante there, he

gave in and let their visitor sit on the bleachers during class. That was a mistake, as Sirius had difficulty keeping the attention of their Ravenclaws, particularly Padma Patil's.

Everyone in Xaphan knew there was a handsome new stranger from France come to Xaphan, who'd saved the Weasley twins from so-called certain death. And having this enigmatic figure there made Sirius's attempts to review Incarcerous land on a less-than-enthusiastic audience. They were all too busy watching Dante to see what he made of all of it.

Millie, for her part, seemed quietly contemptuous of all proceedings.

Padma practically leaped for the chance to duel in front of Dante, but the offer to do so against her from one of the Ravenclaw boys didn't come quick enough. Instead, Millie leaped up from her seat and put her hat in the ring. Padma looked like she would have begged to withdraw if Dante hadn't been watching.

It wasn't as complete a slaughter as it might have been, give Padma that. She managed to block off Millie's initial wave of curses just by the skin of her teeth. Dante came up behind Draco as the girls dueled to breathe in his ear, "You fear Millicent Bulstrode, do you not?"

"I fear no one," Draco lied, and set his attention on the duel, even as Dante took the liberty to smooth Draco's hair out of his face.

"You fear what she makes you think of yourself," Dante whispered, and Draco tried not to shudder at Dante's breath on his neck. "You fear what she might make you do to her."

Draco wanted to irritably say Dante had missed that time, the episode of him and Millie's duel in this class, but as assistant instructor, he had to keep up some semblance of paying attention to the duel at hand.

Proceedings ended as Millie caught Padma obligingly in an Incarcerous rather than a body bind or Stunner like she usually might have. Sirius applauded the demonstration of the technique inside a duel and cast Relashio to free Padma up. Padma was visibly shaken, and the Ravenclaw boys raced to bring her water. Sirius, for his part, made sure Padma was okay before rushing off, having to meet Remus for something or other. Knowing Sirius, that may have just been Sirius's own attempt to wheedle some sexual favors out of Remus's busy schedule, but Draco chose not to share that surmise with the class.

Millie was not one to linger over her defeated prey, but she stayed in the dueling room longer than necessary for some reason, eyes going to Dante, and it wasn't fascination over his appearance. Maybe Millie could sense there was something more to Dante than everyone was saying, which, granted, with the timing of his appearance with the Umbridge and Yaxley murders, wasn't much of a leap.

Dante took this chance, as usual, to wheedle deeper under Draco's skin. "Shall we practice Incarcerous together?" he said smoothly to Draco, "I know you like ropes," loud enough for the whole room to hear, and Draco shook his head quickly.

"Class is over," Draco said, picking his way out from behind fallen training dummies, and Dante offered him a gentlemanly hand up over them. Once he had Draco's hand, though, he

seemed disinclined to let it go. He stroked the back of it and remarked,

"Perhaps not. It *would* be sinful for those soft hands to touch coarse rope," and Draco ducked his head in overwhelmed shyness.

"What is going on here?" a sudden booming Gryffindor voice called, and Draco snatched his hand away from Dante's in a way that must have made him seem guilty of far more than had actually happened.

"Nothing!" Draco said hastily, looking up to face a thunderous-looking Harry. Harry looked bruised and dirtied from his Defense classes, but he posed no less of an imposing figure as he stormed over to Draco and Dante.

Harry ignored Draco's denial, catching Dante's eye instead. "What do you think you were doing just now? You were flirting with him, weren't you?"

Dante chose neither confirm nor deny, watching Harry with amused condescension. "Would that be a crime?" he said, with a languid flip of his long braid, and some of the watching Ravenclaws went, *Ooh...*

"Draco is my boyfriend," Harry said heatedly, "So keep your hands to yourself, *Daniel*," and the name made Dante look annoyed at last.

"Call me Dante," Dante said smoothly, "And frankly, Draco is not your property. I'll do with him however I like."

This time the *Ooh* from the Ravenclaws was considerably louder, as the now water-replenished Padma let out a sizable gasp. There might even have been some shocked sound coming from Millie.

"He's not your property either!" Harry hissed. "Just because he-" Harry stopped, with the things he couldn't say in front of mixed company, and Dante laughed provokingly at Harry's hesitation.

"Do you imagine that *I* would ever take orders from *you*, Harry Potter?" Dante purred, sounding more like his dark lord self, and Draco darted out between them, sensing he had let this go on for too long already.

"Okay, we've all made our, um, opinions clear, so maybe we should just all get going," Draco said uselessly, and Harry stepped around him to level his heroic glare on Dante directly.

"Then I challenge you to a duel," Harry said, words Draco hadn't heard from him since first year after the Snitch incident, a duel Harry had launched by attempting the dread curse of *Spongify.* Draco doubted such benign spells would be flying either way this time.

Draco doubted Harry would have challenged Dante if he hadn't known Dante's true dark past and potential, but this would not help Harry's reputation as a jealous lover.

"A duel?" Dante echoed, still sounding more amused than anything. He couldn't have sounded any less threatened by Harry if Harry had been a bug beneath his shoe. Or a half-

eaten body between a dragon's jaws. "I suppose we are in the right place for it."

"Don't," Draco said helplessly, but they both seemed set on it, as did the crowd, which cheered at Dante's implied agreement.

"What a curse your popularity is, Black," Millie whispered in his ear, and Draco recoiled from her in panic.

"Dante, if you hurt him, I'll never forgive you!" Draco proclaimed without thinking, which made Harry look darker and Dantanian sound his musical laugh.

"I see you have high faith in your boyfriend," Dante observed smoothly, and that made the look on Harry's face make sense. Damn. Draco hadn't meant it that way, but-

"Neither of you should be fighting," Draco said miserably instead. "There's nothing to fight over."

Dante raked his eyes over Draco and purred, "Oh, I rather think there is."

A speechless Draco could only retreat to the bleachers, pulled there by a smirking Millie, between Tony and Terry. "What's going on, Draco?" Tony hissed. "Are you really involved with Dante?"

"No, they're just being idiots," Draco said fiercely, hoping that whatever happened, this would be over quickly with no damage to either side.

He may have been hoping in vain. Millie directed their bows to each other- Harry's cursory, Dante's almost insultingly over-elaborate- and then it began. Dante withdrew a wand that was not the Elder Wand, nor even from what Draco could recall Yaxley or Umbridge's wand. Lord knew which poor witch or wizard had lost that wand to Dante in his travels.

Harry immediately shot the red light of Expelliarmus at Dante, who blocked it with insouciant ease, seeming to wait to judge Harry before getting started. Harry seemed intent on making Dante pay for that disrespect quickly. He sprung into place with a direct shot at Dante and sent fireballs careening at him.

Except Draco could have cursed Harry for his foolishness, because what was Dante? A pyromancer, that was what, and Draco knew from past experience what a god's gift flame could be to a pyromancer in combat.

Dante did not disappoint Draco's expectations. He caught the two fireballs each in either hand, making Harry cry out in shock. Then Harry dove to the ground as Dante sent the fireballs flying back at him, only to roll and jump nimbly away when the flames lengthened like ropes and began to slash through the air in search of him. His Seeker's reflexes stood him in good stead as he leaped over and below the spurts of fire that attacked him, enough that Dante decided to try another tactic.

Dante abandoned the flame, perhaps prematurely, and sent Sectilis procella at Harry, who just barely managed to block the arrow-like bolts that had torn through the air towards him. Dante

advanced towards Harry, who kept his shield in place like the only thing between himself and destruction.

Such was the awe a pyromancer could put into their opponent, as Draco remembered only too well with Theo in the Prefect's bathroom, and Merlin, why did he have to feel that memory ever again, let alone now, save perhaps that Dante was reminding him of the things he hated in himself. Dante dueled like Draco did.

When Dante was close enough, Harry ducked down and shot Impedimenta at Dante's legs, making his whole body move slowly, and then plowed into Dante, taking advantage of what he surely thought his physical superiority over this willowy dark wizard if nothing else.

"Stop it!" Draco heard himself yell as the two of them began to roll around on the floor, both with wands still in hand but not the vantage to use it on each other. They seemed evenly matched until Dante's long braid caught on an uneven stone, pinning his head in place, and Harry's fist drove straight into his eye, where the dragon had been the most vulnerable...

Harry punched him again, in the same place, pure aggression, not even seeming to try to win the duel now as much as hit Dante, and Dante cried out in frustration and blew Harry off him with a weak Reducto that had Harry falling down dazed, both of their ears probably ringing at an explosion so close to both. Dante swirled his wand in his hand and hit Harry with the finger-removing jinx, but he hit the wrong hand, so Harry's wand hand remained intact as he shot a Stunner Dante just managed to block...

The two of them were going back and forth viciously now, Dante bleeding from the face, Harry carrying on as if he didn't even notice the missing fingers on his left hand, which would have had Draco begging and screaming his head off most likely. Red and blue light flashed between the two, deflected and reflected, as Harry used his Seeker's reflexes to weave and dodge, and Dantanian kept a strong shield up throughout, rebounding Harry's curses back onto him.

Draco was beginning to fear for Harry as the duel dragged on, but he hadn't reckoned on Harry's stamina, which made leaping about hardly a matter of great importance to him. Harry kept up his side of proceedings, even after Dantanian made fire grow from his hands and began to throw it openly again in sharp bursts at every part of Harry. Harry countered with a great gust of water, and they strained against each other in a test of raw magical power that Draco feared could only go one way...

It went a different way. The two powers canceled each other out, the fire and the water fading from view as they met and erased one another. The two combatants eyed each other then, both panting for breath, and Draco saw his chance. He ran out between them and yelled, "Stop! That's enough!"

"Draco, move," went Harry, but Draco shook his head. He turned back to look at Dante, who made a true picture, face bruised and trickling down blood from his lip, hair wrenched out of its braid and hanging in loose messes around his face, blood dripped down onto his pristine silver robes.

Not that his dishevelment made him seem any closer to conquered. Except-

"We must defer to Draco," Dante said, voice still proud and carrying through the dueling classroom, "Let this duel be at an end," and the Ravenclaws cheered loudly for no one in particular.

This finally gave Draco a chance to express his opinions. The duel had to have lasted twenty minutes at least, like some overblown Hat stall, so he'd been waiting a while. He refused to cheer for either party. "You suicidal bastards!" Draco screamed, poking a finger into first Dante's chest, then Harry's. "What were you thinking? That was the most ridiculous thing I have ever witnessed in my life!"

"I stood up for you," Harry said with an unshakable smile on his face, and Dante skulked off at once, ignoring Padma's cries offering help on the way to the infirmary. Dante didn't seem to be going there, and if anyone was fully capable of healing their own face, it would be Dante. Draco decided there was no point in following him and clung onto Harry's side. There was blood caked over Harry's bruised knuckles.

"You great Horklump, look at you! You've got no fingers!" Draco wailed, and Harry still didn't look so much as perturbed, pulling Draco against him with his good hand. Harry was soaked in sweat from head to toe, wild hair tousled beyond belief, and glasses askew, so Draco fixed them for him, an involuntary motion of support.

"We can go get Madam Pomfrey to regrow them," Harry said carelessly, and the Ravenclaws cheered again as Draco led Harry out towards the medical bay.

"It's going to take a long time," Draco said worriedly, as they followed the corridors through the school. Draco hoped they wouldn't run into anyone they knew. Hermione would absolutely kill them both. While Luna would be insufferably sullen that she hadn't been invited to the duel. "Harry, I've re-grown bones before, it's excruciating..."

"I don't care," Harry said happily. "I fought for you."

"No one asked you to!" Draco cried out, to no avail. Harry was secure in his Gryffindor conviction.

"Harry, aren't you going to compete in a Quidditch match soon?" Draco complained. "Your fingers will be weak for that."

"I don't care," Harry said firmly, "And once I have two hands to hold you, dragon, I'm going to kiss you so hard you won't care either."

Draco felt the promise roil through his body. "Alright, then."

All of Harry's attentions still didn't keep Draco from sneaking out that night after Harry had fallen asleep. Harry would kill him if he knew where he was going, but Draco had to. Dante was his responsibility, Severus had told him so, and he had to make sure Dante had ended up alright.

Dante called for him to come into his chambers, and it was like nothing had happened. Dante looked immaculate, dressed in a bright burgundy night robe for bed, hair loose in well-groomed curls over his shoulders. His face was restored to its uncanny perfection, all traces of blood gone with it, save for a few scratches on his bare chest he didn't seem to have noticed. Draco decided not to point them out.

"Well, you look good for someone who just went through a duel like that," Draco commented, crossing his arms and leaning against the back of the door, and Dante scowled at him, adorably pettish.

"It was a close fight," Dante said, "It was truly a stalemate," and Draco laughed, conceding the point. It really had been.

"I thought you weren't going to Madam Pomfrey," Draco said, and Dante rolled his eyes.

"I wasn't going to, until a certain Fred Weasley caught me and saw the state I was in. He virtually dragged me there, and made me wait to get the treatment. He seems to have grown unduly attached to me since his rescue."

"Don't give him any encouragement," Draco said darkly. "That's the last thing we need."

"Why, little dragon," Dante purred, "Is that a note of jealousy I hear?" Draco shook his head furiously, and Dante laughed. "Rest assured I have no Weasleys on my mind."

Draco thought he had an idea what Dante had on his mind, but he sure wasn't about to say it. "I'll let you get some sleep, then."

Dante caught Draco's wrist as he turned to leave. "He made love to you tonight, didn't he." It wasn't really a question.

Draco should have slapped Dante for the words, but Dante said them so naturally, as if no one could take any affront. As if he and Draco were merely two halves of the same whole, who had always known everything about each other. Except that was wrong, because Dante knew everything about Draco, and Draco knew next to nothing about Dantanian Noir.

"Yes, he did," Draco said, and Dante gave him his enigmatic little smile.

Lucia Malfoy

Chapter Notes

Playlist

March dawned upon them with Ron's birthday, one Draco would actually be able to attend this year. The trouble was, Draco knew he would die on May 2, so that left him two months and a day on this earth. Not the most cheering thought for Ron's festivities.

Draco still put on the best face he could, not just for Ron but for everyone. Unfortunately, in Draco's case, that happened to correspond with getting rip-roaring drunk. Aberforth Dumbledore would have been proud of the amount Draco imbibed, and Draco was just lucky it was a Saturday and not a school night, because he was already getting the feeling it would be difficult getting up tomorrow morning.

But at least he had tonight, ephemeral and perfect, and it seemed imperative that he let the world know just how perfect it was.

Specifically, the birthday boy. "Ron," Draco sighed, flopping over to Ron's side where he had been trying to chat up Hermione. "Ron, I need to talk to you."

"You can say it in front of her," Ron said confusedly, "Whatever it is," and Draco happily declared,

"I'd say it in front of the world! Ronald Weasley, you are the best friend a wizard could have! When Gilderoy calls you a stalwart companion, he's not wrong! Ron Weasley is simply the crème de la crème!"

"Stop it, mate," Ron said, dodging his compliments with a goofy smile. "Don't need a birthday speech, thanks."

"No, Ron, I'm being serious," Draco insisted, gripping onto Ron's arm and forcing Ron to look into his eyes. "I need you to know how much I've appreciated your friendship over the years. How much it's helped me to change into a better person. I don't think you know that."

"Hermione, what's he doing?" Ron said fearfully. "Draco, is someone about to die or something?"

"Oh, no, he's just colossally drunk," Hermione sighed affectionately. "Someone needs to get him to bed before he embarrasses himself even more. I didn't think Draco was such an affectionate drunk... Harry?"

But Harry was too far away in the party to hear, no doubt being waylaid by his many admirers. The one to step in had a more musical laugh, and robes that shimmered of pure silver and iridescence in the torchlight. "Draco, what a state you're in! I heard what you said to Ron, and I do think it's bedtime for you. I can take him to find Harry."

Ron and Hermione exchanged glances, but they knew Dante well enough by now to trust him with that at least. They let him lead away a protesting Draco. "Wait, Ron, you have to say you understand how important you are to me..."

"I understand," Ron said, covering his face in embarrassment, until Dante took Draco to the center of the dance floor to look around.

"Do you know where Harry is?" Dante said with a sigh.

"No idea," Draco said happily. "Stay a while, Dante. You're *so* pretty..."

Dante dodged Draco's hands as Draco reached out, trying to take hold of Dante's braid to admire it. "Much as I appreciate the sentiment, my love, I would prefer to hear it from you sober-"

"What's wrong with Draco?" Harry demanded, coming over from across the room. Dante gracefully yielded Draco to Harry without further comment, and Harry began the long walk with Draco down the corridors back to their room.

"I wish you didn't spend so much time with him," was all Harry confined himself to saying, but Draco had no interest in Harry's eternal jealousy. Instead, he was still trying to share his sentiments upon one Ron Weasley.

"Seriously, don't you think Ron is, like, the best friend anyone's ever had?" Draco said contentedly. "Someone really needs to tell him how awesome he is..."

"Now you're going to make me jealous of Ron," Harry joked as they walked. Draco leaned his head affectionately on Harry's shoulder, which did slow down their walking pace.

"No," Draco slurred, "Not as a lover, not like you, dragonslayer. You're the only one I want, you know that."

"Do you mean that?" Harry said, pulling back and taking Draco by the shoulders. "Really. I'm really the *only* one you want?"

Maybe Harry was counting on the principle of *in vino, veritas* to scoop out some truth about Dante or some other, but Draco's situation couldn't be further from Harry's suspicions. He had two months now to be with Harry, and that was it. The last thing he was thinking of was wasting time with anyone else.

"Just you," Draco said, and got to watch Harry's bashful little smile as they headed back to their bedroom.

The next afternoon, Draco woke up with the pounding head he richly deserved. Harry was already awake and out, so Draco spent a good deal of time lying around moaning and feeling sorry for himself before he ventured out for sustenance. Worse than the headache, though, was the nausea, making him feel like anything he ate would come right back up. So his footsteps turned towards the dungeons.

Severus had perhaps never looked so unhappy to be interrupted by Draco. "What is it? What!" he barked. He had disheveled robes and hair and looked as though he'd been taken away right in the middle of-

"Severus? Who is it?" Gilderoy called, and appeared in a similar state to Severus a minute later. "Oh, hello, Draco, how are you?"

"This should be urgent," Severus hissed, "Or you will never darken my doorstep again, burdensome godson-"

"I have a hangover," Draco whined. "Do you have any potion for me?"

The look Severus gave him was one he would have hardly bestowed upon a worm. "And here I thought this might have to do with your mother."

Draco blinked rapidly, holding his head still as they talked. Applying pressure to his left temple helped. Meanwhile, Gilderoy went backwards in Severus's chambers as if to search for the potion for him. Draco appreciated the sentiment, much as he doubted Gilderoy would actually be able to find anything.

"My mother?" Draco said, and Severus leaned against the doorframe, lip curling. His desire to be done with Draco seemed to be warring with his desire to be unpleasant towards him for the affront.

"You have not visited your mother in some time, have you?" Severus said silkily, while Gilderoy made sounds like *Oh, it must be back here somewhere* that were frankly alarming for someone who cared about the integrity of Severus's private stores.

"What, do *you* visit her that often?" Draco muttered, and Severus arched an eyebrow.

"As it happens, I do. Perhaps you would have a better idea of what I speak, had you not been... so... neglectful."

"I've been busy," Draco said defensively. "Why, is something wrong with her?"

"She went into labor this morning." Severus delivered the news with satisfaction. "I expect we will be seeing your newborn sister very soon indeed, if we are lucky."

"Why aren't you there?" Draco asked frantically. "Merlin, giving birth, why aren't you with her, Severus..."

Severus let out a huffing breath. "You need not panic, Draco. I assure you, I have supplied any and all potions potentially necessary, and left her in hands more capable than mine for the delivery..."

"Someone should be there with her, though!" Draco exclaimed, heart beating wildly. "Isn't someone supposed to sit with her and, like, support her?"

"That person you speak of," Severus cut in neatly, "Would have theoretically been Lucius Malfoy." Draco opened his mouth, and Severus shut it with a glance. "Nor should you hasten to her side now, Draco. If she had wanted you there during labor, I have no doubt she would have asked for you."

"Maybe she felt like she couldn't," Draco said in a small voice, thinking of some of the less than fully civil words he and Mother had exchanged since her arrival on Xaphan. "Should I go there into the room anyway?" His stomach rolled in its confines as he spoke, reminder of a persistent hangover that wasn't about to go away.

"You are in no state to be going anywhere currently," Severus said curtly. "And even if you were, I find it generally a principle in life to not intrude where you have not been invited. Do you understand me, boy?"

"Yes," Draco said in a small voice, ashamed and clutching his head anew, until Gilderoy popped his tousled blond head around the corner and exclaimed,

"Here it is! This will do you well, young Draco!"

Severus snatched the bottle away from Gilderoy, only to see with some astonishment it was indeed the right vial. "Maybe he's been learning things from you," Draco said ironically, taking the vial and downing it. It tasted horrible, but that was naturally the price of relief.

"So many things," Gilderoy said earnestly, earning a glare from Severus that he just beamed underneath. "So glad to be of help!"

Draco made his way from Severus's chambers to the kitchens, where Dobby snuck him some food on the side at this odd hour. He was surprised to find out from Dobby that word of Mother's labor had spread so far down in the castle. "Dobby is hearing from the house elves bringing fresh linens," Dobby said earnestly. "Dobby wishes your family the best, Draco Black."

Draco stared at him blankly for a moment. "Dobby, you hate my family. You were their ill-treated slave for longer than I've been alive. Do you *really* want the best for us?"

"Dobby holds no more resentment for Narcissa Malfoy," Dobby said solemnly, "Not when it comes to the child. Dobby is hoping that Draco Black will have an adorable new little sister! Will that make Draco Black happy?"

Draco's stomach rolled again. It was hard to tell the difference between the hangover and signs of physical guilt springing themselves upon him. "I suppose so."

Dobby eyed him suspiciously. "Draco Black does not sound very sure."

"If it wasn't for me," Draco said heavily, "This child would already be dead. I interfered, and so now she's coming into the world. Doesn't that make her my responsibility, even more than her just being my sister?"

"Dobby is sure Draco Black will be a good big brother," Dobby said mistily, "And the little Malfoy girl will grow up to idolize her big brother and love him very much, just like Luna Lovegood loves Draco Black."

Oh, yes. That was totally going to happen. "Maybe you're right," Draco said vaguely, and accepted Dobby's congratulatory hug.

Draco wasn't sure where to go or what to do with himself as he waited for the announcement that the labor was over. In the end, he went to the medical bay, where he was allowed to wait outside as long as he wanted. He could hear sounds from inside of intensive grunts and pain, which threatened to make him lose his composure, so he got up and began to pace the area outside the birthing chamber like an expectant father.

"I thought you might be here," he heard from above him, and he looked up only to see Dante hanging above him. Draco would have choked had he had anything near his throat. As it was, he reflexively leaped between Dante and the birthing chamber, in some vain attempt at defense of his mother from her one-time would-be killer.

"Relax, Draco," Dante laughed, the sleeve of his silvery robe brushing Draco's face as he handed him a blue vial. "Draught of peace. I doubted you had enough for what you're currently undergoing."

"Did you get that from my godfather?"

"It was difficult," Dante admitted, with a curious look. "He seemed reluctant to speak to me, much less give me the potion I needed. I get the distinct feeling he dislikes me. Perhaps knowing of my true nature makes it inevitable. But it is a shame. I admire the man."

Draco could care less about those two's damned relationship dynamics. "Listen, Dante..." he hissed, and Dante obligingly lowered his ear for Draco to whisper into it. "Don't hurt my mother. I'll make you regret it."

Dante straightened up looking delighted to be so feared. "Really, Draco, it's like you have a short memory. When I let her go at Malfoy Manor, it was for good. Unless you happen to have... changed your mind..."

"No!" Draco virtually shouted, and cursed himself for potentially disturbing the business inside. Blame it on the stress of Dante before him, lounging carelessly in the hall outside his prospective victim's birthing chamber, as if there was no more natural place for him to be. "Merlin, shouldn't you be off working on your painting?"

As Dante had claimed to be a painter, and was taking indefinite refuge on Xaphan, Remus had commissioned Dante to produce a magical painting for the entrance of Xaphan. It was

indeed one area Xaphan was sorely lagging behind Hogwarts in, paintings, even if Dante had no intention of creating a portrait for them. No, Sirius had heard of Dante's specialty of painting dragons and thereafter could be satisfied with nothing but a dragon to greet their visitors when they arrived. Naturally, it was to be an Antipodean Opaleye.

"The painting is... proceeding along," Dante said, wrinkling his nose in the way that meant switching to the magical method of painting was more difficult than he had anticipated. No wonder he was off haunting Draco's steps again rather than setting his nose to his work. It would have been amusing at another time, to watch such a fearsome dark wizard as Dantanian Noir struggling, were Draco's mind not so thoroughly fixated on what was going on inside the medical bay.

"You should get back to it," Draco said tiredly, rubbing his eyes. The calm feeling of the draught of peace was sinking through him, making the razor edge of his anxiety better, but it made the sluggish effect of the hangover worse. "Mother's not exactly going to be overjoyed to see you if you show up at her bedside, you know."

"Never let it be said," Dante said smoothly, "That I would linger where I am not wanted," and made his graceful exit.

Labor took longer than Draco expected, long enough for Harry to show up and take a seat at his side to wait with him. Draco leaned in, relieved, to Harry's warm presence, and let Harry comfort him, rubbing his back whispering reassurances. Ron, Hermione, and Luna showed up around dinnertime with food from the Great Hall, and they ate their dinner off a blanket on the floor together. They all pledged their intention to stay with Draco until the birth had been accomplished. Draco had no idea how long that was going to take, so he was especially profuse in his thanks for their faithfulness.

It was perhaps midnight when the doors opened upon the five yawning teenagers, Draco and Harry watching the other three play Gobstones. "Mr. Black," said Madam Pomfrey, "Your mother is asking for you," and Draco leapt to his feet, already overwhelmed.

"Is it over? Has she given birth?" Draco asked anxiously, and Madam Pomfrey's smile told him everything he needed to know even before she said,

"Your mother is perfectly fine, Mr. Black, and has given birth to a healthy baby girl."

Draco took in the cries of celebration and embraces from his friends with half a mind, the other half wondering why his mother wanted to see him now, when she hadn't asked for him to attend the birth. "Thank you," Draco said, breaking free from an overzealous Luna. "I should go see her now."

"Maybe we can meet your baby sister later," said Hermione with a rapturous grin, as if the miracle of birth was something to be celebrated no matter what, even if it had just been accomplished by a Death Eater.

"Yes," said Draco, "I'll try and arrange for that. Goodnight, everyone," he broke off, and gave Harry a goodbye kiss before heading into the birthing chamber. It smelled of scent enchantments, but not the blood and gore he expected. Nor was the baby a blood-red squalling thing in his mother's arms, but a cute peaceful sleeping baby.

Mother looked tired but beautiful, and indomitable holding her new child, seeming anything but a captive in that moment from her natural authority as a mother.

"Mother," Draco said, unsure how affectionate he was meant to act given the uncertain state of their relationship, but she beckoned him over.

"There you are, Draco," she said hazily, "Give your little sister a kiss," and Draco hesitated.

"I don't want to wake her," Draco said, and Mother shook her head.

"Just gently, you won't," Mother said happily, "This one's a sound sleeper, not like you were," and Draco tentatively pressed down his lips onto the soft fuzz of the baby's head.

"Hi, I'm your brother," Draco said awkwardly, in a whisper. *Your brother for two months,* he vowed, whatever that meant.

"Draco," Mother said steadily, holding the cuddled baby up to his gaze still after he kissed it. "Draco, I need you to promise me something."

Dread crept into Draco's elusive moment of happiness, a dread that quickly suffused him. When he asked, "What?" he tried not to sound too apprehensive, but he probably failed.

"If anything happens to me," Mother said unflinchingly, "If- when- I go to Azkaban, or- or worse- I need you to promise me you will look after your sister yourself."

"What?" Draco said, instinctively panicked in a way that had him glad Dante had brought him extra draught of peace earlier. "Are you being serious?"

They were lucky no one else was in the room at the moment, because the gaze Mother leveled on Draco then suggested Draco was being an extra special level of cruel. "Yes, Draco," she said, "I am being as serious as I have ever been. I need to know this little girl will be cared for in my absence."

Draco didn't know how to refuse someone on their birthing bed. It was like saying no to someone on their deathbed, and with the sound of what his mother was saying, it almost seemed she considered it so. "What about- Severus, or Andromeda Tonks, or-" He failed to produce any other names.

"You are my son, Draco, deny it as you like," Mother said, voice carrying clear throughout the room and taking on an eerie echo, like a stitch of permanence. "And this is *your sister.* I am not asking you raise her, but promise me you will take responsibility for her, should the worst happen."

"I can't do that," Draco said without thinking, panicked and backing away, thinking, *Two months,* and Mother's voice followed him wherever he went in the room.

"You must, Draco," she said, "Why would you deny me this?" and Draco raced back over to her side where he knew he was supposed to be, but only in hopes of making her understand.

"I'm not fit for the job," Draco blurted, which was as close to the truth as he could tell. "I might die when we try to retake Hogwarts, besides. There's no guarantee I'll be there..."

"Not you," Narcissa said with utter certainty. "My son is a survivor. Here, take her."

Draco was forced to take the slight burden of his little sister in his arms, not entirely sure what the right way to hold her was, but Mother corrected his grip for him. "You are her brother, and you must promise. Do you promise?"

"I promise," Draco said, defeated, and held up the weight of his little sister until his mother asked for her back.

It was a week before Draco learned the name of his mother's child. In the interim, Tonks had given birth and named her and Cedric's child Theodore, much to Draco's secret chagrin- even if it was for Ted Tonks, her father. Draco just couldn't abide so much as the name anymore. Nor did Millie seem to appreciate the coincidence, judging by the look that crossed her face when he saw her told.

A week after the birth, and Draco learned the name of his mother's child through Severus, who came up to him after dinner and said they needed to talk. Draco followed Severus contentedly to his chambers, thinking perhaps Severus needed some advice on curtailing Gilderoy's romantic gestures. Instead, what Severus had to tell him pertained to Draco's family, and it was not good news at all.

"Lucia?" Draco asked disbelievingly. "She's named the girl Lucia?"

"I understand it was after much thought and contemplation," Severus said moderately.

"After Lucius?" Draco spat. "Seriously? She asks me to guard over the child, and she names her *that*?"

"It was my understanding," Severus said carefully, "That you were not pleased at your father's death, Draco. Or was that simply at the manner of it?"

Draco hardly heard Severus. "I have to go talk to her. This can't stand," he blurted, and raced off towards Mother's cell.

He found Mother with the new baby- he refused to think of her as Lucia- nursing. Draco waited discreetly outside until Mother finished, then stormed in with all the sound and fury he had been saving up. "What is the meaning of this?"

Mother looked up, the picture of perfect, angelic maternal innocence. With the child calm in her arms as she always seemed to be, Mother's blonde hair wreathed her head like a halo. "Draco, you'll have to be more specific. I don't understand what you mean."

"You know!" Draco seethed, crossing the room towards her, full of a rage he didn't understand in himself. "You know!"

"I'm afraid I don't," she said mildly. "Please, don't raise your voice, I'm trying to get Lucia to sleep."

"Lucia!" Draco exploded, so virulently Mother put a protective arm around her baby. "That's the problem! You're really named the child Lucia? After Father?"

"Yes, I have," Mother said patiently, as if a part of her might have been expecting this reaction from him. But she had persevered in the face of that.

"Why?" Draco demanded, throwing his hands up, and she regarded him like he was behaving ridiculously.

"Why not?"

"After Father," Draco repeated, and began to pace the small cell to work out some of the anger coursing through him. "You really think that's fitting, to name an innocent child after Father?"

"Because he was a Death Eater?" Mother asked, half-bravely, half-fearfully. "Because I am as well." She let her sleeve fall away from her Dark Mark, exposing it, as if that made some kind of point other than how terribly Draco couldn't stand to look at it.

Draco averted his eyes. "You're saddling a new human being with that legacy? To have to know all her life she's been named after a man like that?" Draco could remember pleading with Dante for his mother's life, and Dante saying, *She's always neglected you, she let your father hurt you.* The thought hit Draco and made him have to bite back worse words. "It's bad enough she'll have to be a Malfoy," he finished more tamely.

Mother still didn't take that lying down. "Would you have her not be a Malfoy anymore, then, like you? Would you take away her name from her-"

"*You* took away my name from me!" Draco screamed at the top of his lungs, and the baby began to cry. With a dark look under her brows, Mother dismissed him with a single gaze. Draco fled the room breathing hard, hand on the talon wand in his pocket.

Planning for the assault of Hogwarts had advanced considerably in recent times, given the nearing of its intended date, May 1. Professor Flitwick had constructed a miniature diorama of Hogwarts which would animate and peel back sections for them to look at as they devised their attack strategy. Some of these meetings involved only the seniormost members of the Order, and some involved anyone at Hogwarts who wished to attend. This was one of the former ones, which meant Draco was not invited.

But Draco still had a vantage point in through his needling of Sirius and Remus, who tended to give up information to him when pressed. They weren't like Severus, who could be an

absolute safe, even without any good reason to be. Remus came home that note and in no time was admitting, "We're having difficulties with the very start of the assault."

"What's wrong?" Draco asked, and Sirius went over to rub Remus's tired shoulders in response. Harry made sympathetic noises, though he too looked intent on finding out what the adults had just discussed.

"With the means to disrupt Hogwarts's protective spells and enchantments," Remus sighed, looking pensive. "Such a thought, to know them to inevitably be a barrier *against* our side. Who would have thought those wards would not be keeping us safe, but keeping us out?"

"Well, we've got to get through the wards, or there is no attack," Sirius said bluntly, and earned a little glare from Remus. Sirius made a kissy face at Remus, who scoffed in faux-disgust and turned back to his adopted sons.

"Obviously," Remus said, "But of the various solutions we have suggested, none of them seem certain to work."

"Um, actually," Draco said, raising his hand, "I think I might have an idea."

Moody, Shacklebolt, McGonagall, and Flitwick all shared one large Portkey to the deserted island, and Severus, Sirius, Remus, Draco and Dante shared another. Once they all arrived, the behavior of some of the adults led Draco to a surprising conclusion: however many of them had been told Dante was more than he seemed, not one of those without the full picture seemed to have any idea what Dante was capable of.

Draco knew Dante could murder them all, right here and now, if he wanted to. But he had confidence in Dante's sanity.

Well. As much confidence as you could have for someone who'd turned a little boy into a Dementor in order to feed his father to him.

And who Draco had watched his own father be eaten alive by, and the list of reasons to doubt Dante could stretch on and on, but they needed to succeed at Hogwarts badly enough that it was time in Draco's mind, perhaps, to make a so-called deal with the devil.

"What is this, Black?" Moody complained, directing himself towards Draco rather than Dante, as if Dante was of so little consequence, he might as well have been brought along as a piece of eye candy for the ride. "What is the mysterious purpose that has you whisking us all away to this hellish snowscape?"

Draco thought hellish was an exaggeration, taking the place all and all. An unused island not too far from Xaphan, the rocky cliffs and crags were indeed covered in snow, with a leisurely snowfall drifting down at them at the moment. Draco found it rather picturesque in truth, but now hardly seemed to be the time to remark upon the aesthetic dimension of this enterprise.

"Yes, Draco," Shacklebolt said gently, coming over to eye him with a disturbed look. "I can't imagine why you've brought us here, though you say you may have a way to disrupt Hogwarts's protective enchantments." The look on his face suggested that if it had been any other student making such a claim, he would hardly be here wasting his time. "Is your way truly so dangerous as to require this much solitude?"

"And secrecy," Draco put in. "We can't be sure there's no spies on Xaphan-"

"Dangerous, Mr. Black," McGonagall echoed. "Is this to be a dangerous demonstration?"

Dante might as well have faded into the ether for all the mind they were paying him. It made what Draco knew was about to happen seem quite funny.

"Dangerous might be a word for it," Draco hedged. "But I think you'll see, everything will be perfectly under control."

"Let us see, then!" Flitwick squeaked, waving his arms in trustful excitement, and Draco almost felt bad about the shock he was about to give him, but he had no choice other than to turn and say,

"Dante, I think it's time."

"Are you sure?" Dante said smoothly, gazing over the assembled Order members. "You don't wish to explain to them first what is about to happen?" Draco gave him a bit of a wild grin. "You are right, my love. Perhaps it would be best just to show them."

It all happened apropos of nothing. No shouted words, no fanfare, no flash of light. Just one moment Dante was standing there in his iridescent robes, making a pretty picture amidst the snow, and then his form was twisting and scaling before their very eyes, transforming and sending the snow flying upon them.

McGonagall and Flitwick steadied each other by the arm, as loud exclamations of shock came from every person there except Draco. Draco, for his part, was the most surprised by the disrupted snow he had to flip out of his hair.

It happened more quickly than one could ever imagine such a thing should happen. Draco had thought time distorted for him in the quagmire of Malfoy Manor, that he had misremembered it as if a flash, but it really was like one, iridescent robes into iridescent scales on a scale of who knew how many to one.

"Holy fucking shit," Sirius said faintly, clinging to Remus's side instinctively, as Dante became an Antipodean Opaleye for them all to see. His purple-gray eyes were the greatest impact, the most salient feature like before, and their uncanny presence resting upon any of the hearty wizards before him was enough to make them jump and shy backwards.

"My word," McGonagall said shakily, while only Severus maintained some semblance of dignity at the spectacle before him, standing alone and facing Dante as if he believed he could personally take him down given the necessity.

Draco clapped his hands together in glee at how easily and seamlessly the transformation had taken place, and smiled up at Dante, hoping Dante could see his pleasure, as the dragon took off and settled himself on the edge of a nearby cliff. The sheer vertical drop of it was heartstopping as their group tentatively approached Dante, but then, Dante must like it that way, as a being capable of flight.

"Someone tell me my eyes have deceived me," Shacklebolt said shakily, "And that young man before us didn't just turn into a dragon."

"Your eyes never have failed you yet, Kingsley," Moody said gruffly, and withdrew his wand.

"Stop!" Draco said, leaping in front of him. "Dante is our friend! I told him to do that. I wanted him to show you his power, so you could use him to take down the defenses at Hogwarts!"

"And how exactly do you propose he does that?" Moody scoffed, though Draco could tell his hostility might lie in fear, so unusual for a man like him.

"Dragonfire," Draco said simply, and when they all stared at him speechlessly, Draco added weakly, "It worked on the wards of Malfoy Manor."

"So this is what happened to Malfoy Manor," Flitwick gasped. "Daniel Shaw was the dragon?"

"Malfoy Manor was burnt to the ground," McGonagall said crisply, refusing to show any more signs of surprise or discomfort in her proud manner. "Much as I appreciate your innovative thinking, Mr. Black, we are attacking Hogwarts in order to save it, not to decimate it."

"Dante doesn't have to burn the place," Draco said earnestly, "Just take down the wards, we've discussed it. He can control himself."

"Can he?" Severus asked silkily, almost so quietly only Draco could hear him, and Draco immediately nodded. Did they all not see how few, if any, other options they had before them?

"Well, Mr. Black," McGonagall said finally, staring at Dante while trying to hide her intense curiosity, "We will certainly take your suggestion under advisement. Not without, of course, dialogue with Mr. Shaw, who seems the key ingredient to this adventure of yours."

"Why did he burn down Malfoy Manor?" Shacklebolt asked, and Draco shrugged uncomfortably.

"It needed burning down. Dante, will you come back?" he bellowed.

It seemed to take even less time for Dante to return to human form. Just a twist of ice crystals in the wind, and Dante was striding forward towards all of them again, robes back in place immaculately, hair only slightly wild. His greatest sign of exertion was his flushed cheeks, which were red from the cold. His breath came out white in the air like the smoke from a

dragon's breath, and his steps on the snow seemed unlikely to even leave footprints, so ethereal he seemed to float over the ground. Except of course if one looked behind him there was, indeed, footprints.

"Shaw," Moody greeted him roughly. "You couldn't have given us all a warning before you went off and did a crazy thing like that?"

Dante laughed, a tinkling sound that melded into the whipping of the wind and made the snow-covered cliffs seem that much more beautiful. "Would you have believed me if I had?"

"Who *are* you?" Flitwick asked more shakily, and Dante just gave him that enigmatic little smile.

"Well, at least we know why he's so good at painting dragons," Sirius grumbled, and earned a round of shell-shocked laughter from his compatriots.

"I apologize for any shock I may have caused," Dante said smoothly, the consummate gentleman now that he no longer had scales and walked on four legs, and the Portkeys took them all back to Xaphan.

Draco waited outside for Dante to finish his questioning with the Order, pacing the hallway like he had for his mother giving birth. At least the movement helped the process of him thawing off from that truly freezing island, with the feel of ice crystals still lingering under his skin inside his blood needing to be fully melted.

Dante exited the room with his usual grace, no sign of being perturbed on his face, which lit up at the sight of Draco waiting. "Tell me," Draco said immediately, striding up to Dante and pulling him to walk with him away from the adults. "Tell me everything."

There was less to tell than Draco might have thought. Nonsensically, Dante had continued to deny the murders of Umbridge and Yaxley, and even more nonsensically, the Order had seen fit to at least pretend for expediency's sake to believe him. And it sounded from hints Dante had gleaned that startled as they were, and alarmed at the thought of Hogwarts burning to the ground, they were sorely tempted to take Dante's appearance as the deus ex machina it was.

"Deus ex machina," Dante said thoughtfully. "What does that mean, exactly?"

"Oh, come on, you know," Draco said, as their footsteps took them down the corridors.

"I don't, actually. I never paid much attention in school," Dante sighed. "Will you translate for me, little dragon?"

Draco hated to inflate this man's ego any more than necessary, but there was no helping it. "Literally, it means a god from the machine. An act of god."

"God, hmm..." Dante said, pushing his finger to his lips and pretending to consider the appellation for himself.

"Stop it!" Draco laughed, shoving Dante a bit playfully, only to take on a more sober demeanor when they neared his room with Harry. He thought Harry's jealousy over Dante had improved since the duel against him, but it never hurt to avoid giving it fuel.

"I will leave you here, my love," Dante said, and kissed Draco's hand before leaving him at the door to his room.

"Was that Dante?" Harry asked suspiciously as Draco came in, only to smile at Draco's excited demeanor. "What is it, dragon? What's got you so happy?"

"Only," Draco said, grabbing Harry and pressing a dreamy kiss to his lips, "I think there might just be a chance we can take Hogwarts back after all."

On the Eve of Battle

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Dante had left it till late, but he had finished, give him that. Even if it was right before the assault on Hogwarts, he had finished his painting. On the morning of April 29, Remus called anyone who was interested onto the front steps of Xaphan for the grand unveiling.

Remus had underestimated the turnout. Full of nerves for the upcoming attack whether they were allowed to be part of it or not, the students showed up in droves for a simple painting reveal, desperate to be doing something. As it was, they had children in great lines to file past the comparatively small new portrait of a dragon.

It was not *very* small. Unless compared to the scale of an entire school looking at it, the painting of the Antipodean Opaleye was huge, with the silver cloth draped over it dwarfing any single onlooker. It seemed to be horizontal, or however these things were described- Draco didn't know art- and restless, to judge by the rustling of the cloth caused by no human hand.

And it was beautiful, of course it was, beautiful as its artist as the cloth fell and everyone applauded in far more rapture than any achievement at painting likely deserved. Dante stood beneath the painting and faced his well-wishers with his usual grace, waving hello to overexcited first-years and even giving a hug to one who broke ranks to get one from him. And one to Fred Weasley, who also saw his opportunity when he had it. Dante was laughing by the time the commotion ceased, tinkling musical laugh cascading high above all the other noise like something otherworldly intruding upon the menial world.

Such was the quality of the Antipodean Opaleye that Dante had painted, with its purple-gray eyes and its long outstretched wings in a simple stretch of silver-clouded open sky. The sky had a hint of smoke coming up into it, though, which left the suggestion if nothing else- either than the dragon's open mouth- that there was something being burned by the dragon, even if the dragon just flew around and did not expel fire in the picture proper. *The noblest pose for its kind*, Dante had told Draco during one visit to his studio, much as Draco had tried to argue the concept.

The dragon was a portrait, for all of Sirius's bragging of their difference from Hogwarts with all of its portraits. Dante had unerringly painted himself. This was Astaroth as he had looked above Malfoy Manor, save for the presence of Draco upon his neck. Draco supposed he could only be glad Dante hadn't decided to go for historical verisimilitude. How few people there yet knew that Dante could become a dragon, though, was notable, and Draco doubted anyone

else had his certainty this was Dante himself and no other, through visions in the Pensieve and the dragon's wreckage itself.

"You painted yourself," Draco hissed as he edged past Dante between admirers, and Dante shrugged elegantly, composed as ever even in his big moment.

"It was the easiest. Magical painting really is difficult," Dante said apologetically, and Draco just shook his head in amused admiration of the man's effrontery.

Harry approached them with a guarded admiration of his own. "It's very beautiful," he said obligingly to Dante, who thanked him as if a vicious duel had never taken place between the two of them.

"It is, isn't it!" Luna exclaimed happily as she joined them, only to fall silent when she spotted something from outside the picture frame.

Much of the entrance hall fell silent, students parting where they stood, inexplicably, until at last the object of their shock delivered itself. It was not one but two boys, both dressed in Gryffindor uniforms.

One was supporting the other, who looked bruised and tired but thoroughly alive. Seamus Finnigan was the first boy, his ruddy face projecting nothing so much as sheer relief as he stepped upon Xaphan for what had to be his first time.

It was not the first time for his beleaguered companion. The second boy was Neville Longbottom.

"NEVILLE!" Luna shrieked, proclaiming it for everyone to hear, and practically shoved Draco down the stairs in her haste to get closer to Neville.

Word spread in murmurs around the crowd, people saying to each other *Neville Longbottom,* and as Luna reached Neville, applause broke out, applause that soared up to the rafters in its passionate disbelief, students screaming and stamping their feet for their imprisoned hero.

Neville broke off from Seamus's support to stare at Luna in disbelief of his own, as if this was too good a sight for him to have ever dreamed seeing again. When Draco followed Luna's path to stare at Neville more closely, he could make out the telltale crimson moons under Neville's fingers of the Cruciatus curse used upon him, and recently.

It didn't stop Neville from straightening up, stretching out those marked hands, and enfolding his girlfriend in the kind of kiss people wrote storybooks about. That earned another cheer, loud as the first.

"Neville!" Ron yelled, and soon Harry and Ron were barreling into Neville too, hugging him until Seamus had to grab onto Neville to help hold him up again. "And Seamus, what are you doing here? I thought you were going to Hogwarts!"

"Neville, you're home," Luna sniffled, tears come to her big light eyes, but she stepped aside and let Hermione and Ginny seize and hug Neville within an inch of his life.

"I was," Seamus Finnigan declared, in a hush that spread over the onlookers to listen. "But I'm done! I've had enough! And I've brought Neville with me!"

Some first-years cheered only to be shushed by their classmates, rapt in attention now at how this miracle had unfurled, just before the assault on Hogwarts. "Oh, thank you, Seamus," Luna cried. "You broke him out of prison at Hogwarts and ran away with him?"

"It wasn't easy," Seamus said with a relieved sigh, until he too was bowled over by a shocked and excited Dean Thomas, unable to believe his best friend had showed up the hero. And soon Sirius and Remus returned from where they had ran off with Frank and Alice Longbottom.

"Neville! My boy!" Frank called, and Neville's tensed face finally relaxed, looking close to tears at the sight of his parents.

"Oh, it's my Neville!" Alice cried out, sounding staggered, supported by Remus as she made her way over to her returned son. After everything this family had been through together, it gave a special piquancy to the sight of the roles reversed, the parents greeting the once-absent son as he came back from a nightmare of torture to be with them again.

Frank and Alice seized Neville up in devastated embraces before turning to thank Seamus, who they were gracious enough not to forget. The sight of the family reunion drew one more cheer, until McGonagall hurried forward from her perch and declared, "Mr. Longbottom is injured! Everyone give way so we may take him for medical attention!"

Despite the human desire to gawk, people were soon tripping over each other in their haste to get out of the way of McGonagall with Neville's party. Madam Pomfrey, who had come out to the back of the crowd to watch the painting unveiled too, had to virtually sprint to catch up to them. Draco walked beside Neville, hoping he wouldn't be sent away himself too soon. He wanted to hear from Neville and Seamus what had happened, and how Seamus had possibly managed to accomplish this.

It turned out that Neville had been held in the dungeons of Hogwarts, and tortured at first for information on Harry Potter's activities that it soon became clear he didn't have. Then he was simply kept there, in a barren cell, being used for the students to practice their Cruciatus curses on until they got them just right. Seamus and a number of other students had simply refused from the off, and had never backed off on that promise. Students got the Cruciatus from each other if they had misbehaved in the eyes of the Carrows, but Neville had gotten it every day, for nothing at all.

Still, none of them had managed to get close enough to freeing Neville, until that one fateful night that the Death Eaters had all been too busy to personally guard his cell, and students had been used in place as guards. When word spread of the decision by the Death Eaters, the informal student resistance had known this was their chance to save Neville, before the arrival of battle might lead the Death Eaters to simply execute him in his cell.

If it had been a Slytherin like Vince or Greg put there, maybe it would have come to battle. But when Zacharias Smith saw the group of Gryffindors gathered up against him, he'd conceded the position without a fight, and let them all try their best at breaking the

enchantment keeping Neville in his cell. It had apparently been Lavender Brown of all people to try the right counter-curse, and then Seamus had taken on the task of getting the exhausted and tormented Neville out of Hogwarts. Seamus had remembered the exit through the Room of Requirement from last year's evacuation of Hogwarts, which, incredibly, none of the Death Eaters knew about or at least were guarding.

The pair had made it out into the Hog's Head without causing any disruption or getting the Death Eaters in Hogsmeade on their tail. Neville had borrowed Seamus's wand, as the one who knew the way to Xaphan, and had Apparated them to the front steps, little dreaming there would already be a grand party of students and teachers waiting to welcome the heroes home.

Such came out in bits and pieces in the medical bay, luckily without any undermining of the cover story of Neville's capture. Neville simply didn't speak of the way he'd been kidnapped, either because he sensed it wise not to or Luna had dropped him a quick word on the way. Seamus, for one, was full of self-recrimination for not having been a student at Xaphan from the start, feeling himself a traitor for attending Hogwarts.

"But if you weren't at Hogwarts," Alice said, "You couldn't have brought back Neville to us."

"And there was my parents to think of," Seamus said uncomfortably. "I've sent them word to go into hiding now, and hopefully they'll manage it, but whatever happens, I had to do the right thing. For Neville. We all just had to do it."

"Your parents will be completely safe at Xaphan," Remus said soothingly, "Should you manage to communicate for them to come here-"

"See, that's the thing I've been trying to tell all of you, though," Seamus said, wincing. "I wouldn't want my parents to take refuge at Xaphan, because here is going to be under attack soon. The truth is that- everyone at Hogwarts knows it, I'm surprised you haven't had word yet somewhere- the truth is that on May the first, Hogwarts is going to attack Xaphan."

Once Seamus spilled the beans, chaos quickly ensued at Xaphan as news spread of the impending attack. It spread, though, along with McGonagall's new judgment: as they could not afford to have the battleground be Xaphan, they would be moving up their own attack a day, and be assaulting Hogwarts tomorrow, the 30th of April.

Classes were all canceled, after a grand announcement of the change in the Great Hall. Everyone was instantly put on edge, as preparations had to sped up a day. It was as if they hadn't been planning to assault Hogwarts already, the stress that seemed to erupt at the news they were advancing the date. "We will be ready," McGonagall had promised them all, and Draco tried to reassure anyone who would listen to him of the same. Too bad his own respiratory system didn't seem to be cooperating in his assessment.

Draco found himself on the verge of one of his attacks without any draught of peace left, so it was off to Severus's chambers to annoy his godfather yet again. When he arrived, though, he

could hear voices yelling from behind the door, elevated enough to make him hesitate at the threshold. Only for a moment, though. He needed that potion.

When Severus wrenched the door open to Draco's knocking, he had a ferocious look on his face that made Draco fear for Gilderoy for a second- until he saw Gilderoy, and saw that Gilderoy's usually placatory visage was full of similar vim and vigor.

"Okay," Draco said slowly, "I guess I can come back..."

"What do you want?" Severus barked, and Draco asked for his draught of peace in an embarrassed tone that still got him three vials, immediately recovered from the private stores by Severus. It didn't keep Severus from being trailed by an incensed Gilderoy on his way.

"Look, it's Draco! I think he deserves to have a say, don't you!"

"Why," Severus said through clenched teeth, "Would my inept excuse for a godson have any more insight than I as to whether you should be allowed-"

"He's the one who brought me to Xaphan, he if anyone has a right to decide-"

"Oh, and I have no rights that matter-"

"Since when have you ever wanted to claim any *rights* over me, Severus-"

Inept excuse for a godson? Not exactly what Draco wanted to be hearing right before the assault. But far more worrisome was seeing these two at each other's throats. That wasn't what Severus needed before going off to war, his lover so furious at him. "Will someone please just tell me what's going on?"

"Severus says I'm not allowed to take part in the assault on Hogwarts!" Gilderoy yelled, and Draco blinked, trying to think of a reply that wouldn't offend Gilderoy.

"Well, some people do have to stay back to look after the children," Draco said slowly, getting the feeling these must be arguments Severus had uttered before it descended to a screaming match. "And Gilderoy, you are technically our prisoner *at Xaphan*-"

"And you can give me permission to go wherever you like! Draco, *everyone* of age is allowed to go to Hogwarts! Even sixth-years are being allowed with parental permission!" Gilderoy lamented, throwing his hands in the air while Severus seethed behind him. "I'm a grown adult! I don't need parental permission! What's wrong with me that I shouldn't take part in our mission?"

There were so many ways to answer that, and none of them pretty. For the sake of this budding relationship, Draco hoped Severus hadn't answered any of them. "Gilderoy, calm down," Draco said, stalling for time. "Why don't we all sit down and discuss this like sensible people..."

With a huff, Gilderoy sank onto the arm of Severus's favorite armchair, his regular perch, while Severus took the chair. Draco took a chair facing it, and then they were sitting with Gilderoy's fate in the balance between the three of them. "Gilderoy," Severus said finally,

"You are a noncombatant. Do you not recall the day you *fled* Hogwarts sooner than face danger there-"

"And I've changed since then! Haven't I?" Gilderoy protested quickly, and Draco couldn't exactly say, *Yes, as a person, but maybe not in combat abilities*?

"And there was Nurmengard," Draco said uncomfortably, remembering Gilderoy being taken hostage and used against them, and Gilderoy made a brattish sound of discontent.

"I had my magic taken from me then! It's not fair to take that as an example!" Gilderoy complained. "Draco, I don't want to be parted from Severus! I don't want him going into danger without me by his side! Surely you can understand that, with you and Harry-"

Severus got a thunderous look on his face, but didn't say a word, thankfully. Draco answered instead. "Gilderoy, I think Severus would be best served by not having to worry about you in the line of fire."

"But Severus," Gilderoy said, grabbing onto Severus's arm, "I love you! Surely that has to count for something. Don't leave me out! I love you so much-"

Severus shifted under Draco's gaze, seeming acutely aware of his godson watching. "And I... find your company not entirely unpleasant, Gilderoy, but Draco is right. I do not want to have to worry about you."

Draco edged out of his chair and towards the door. "I'll just leave you two to it, shall I? Good luck, both of you. I'll see you tomorrow!"

After leaving Severus's chamber with a draught of peace drank to the dregs, Draco's footsteps took him in an unexpected direction: the Slytherin common room. He was coming up behind some nervous first-years who didn't scruple to let him in with them. Thus he got the opportunity to scrutinize the differences between this place and his memory of Hogwarts.

He missed the underwater glow from the lake, and oddly enough, some of the old place's austerity. This version was more lavish, with green and silver silks and velvet everywhere. It was almost overdone, as if no effort had been spared in hosting such a negligible number of Slytherins. Maybe their ilk couldn't be allowed to feel forgotten.

One thing was familiar: the presence of Millicent Bulstrode, curled up in a large jade armchair, uncharacteristically idle, staring into the distance. That all changed when the noise of the first-years upset her reverie and she caught sight of Draco. She virtually sprang from her chair to make her way towards him, blocking him off with her body so the intruder could make no more headway into her house.

"What are you doing here, Black?"

"Looking for you, actually," Draco said, as casually as he dared, and watched Millie look him over with her barely concealed contempt, as if unable to believe he'd had the courage to seek

her out after everything that had passed between them. But as it happened, Draco did. "Is there somewhere we can go by ourselves to talk?"

Draco expected her to say she'd sooner butcher Mr. Wilberforth than go anywhere with him, thank you very much, but she obliged with a dark nod. "The hallway," she said, as if unable to bear his intrusion into Slytherin any longer, and she led him out of her common room with her head held high.

As soon as they were a decent enough distance from the Slytherin common room to be out of earshot, she grabbed him by the wrist and spun him around towards her, making very apparent the disparity in bulk between them. "What is it, Black? Whatever it is, you'd better be quick about it."

"Oh, I know," Draco said evenly, "We've got a war on tomorrow," and she just crossed her arms over her chest, not giving away any reaction to that harrowing fact. So Draco had to outright ask her. "How do you feel about that? Are you going?"

"What do you mean, am I going?" Millie snapped. "I'm a seventh-year at Xaphan, all of us are going- well, except Longbottom, he's too tortured out to, if I've heard right-"

"Show some respect for his name," Draco cut in annoyed, "After everything he went through because of *our* mistake-" Read, *your* mistake, of course, since it had just been Millie, Ginny, and Luna there when Neville was taken, but Draco wasn't about to go that far.

"Yes, fine, fine, it's very tragic everything that happened, and very wonderful he's been brought back to your adoring cousin," Millie said impatiently. "Anyway, yes, I'm going to the invasion of Hogwarts-"

"Professor McGonagall prefers to call it an assault," Draco said rather smartly, and Millie arched a thick eyebrow at him.

"Are you here to talk to me or just argue?"

"Talk," Draco said, and chewed his tongue, because maybe he'd been delaying the moment he had to speak what was really on his mind, the reason he'd really come to see Millie. "We're both going to fight then, yeah. But what will you do if it's one of our friends you have to fight? Vince or Greg or Pansy or Blaise? What will you do then?"

"What will *you* do?" Millie countered harshly, a shadow clouding her face. "I certainly hope the answer isn't to kill them too."

"It's not!" And that was rather the problem, actually. It would have been so much easier if Draco could be like Dante, and regard every enemy of his as better off dead. But Draco didn't even want the old Kingsnakes *hurt*. "I don't know what I'd do. That's why I'm asking you."

"Do you think I know either?" Millie said acidly, as if this all was Draco's fault, and maybe it was. Maybe if Draco hadn't done what he'd done to Theo's father- to Theo- he could have brought all of their friends over to his side, not just Millie. Maybe then they'd all be planning

the assault together down here in the dungeons. Draco could only imagine how excited Pansy would have been.

"I don't want to fight them," Draco admitted in a low voice, closing his eyes. "I just wish there was a way we didn't have to..."

Millie let out a bitter laugh. "Don't tell me you've come to me with all that weak, regret shit. You did what you did, and chose what you chose, and so did I, and now we have some inconvenient enemies. What are we going to do about it? *I don't know.* Now, do you need me to show you the way out of the dungeons?"

Draco did find his way out, and into his and Harry's room, where he could escape into Harry's kiss for a moment, and try to silence the thoughts of the Kingsnakes. Then Ron and Hermione appeared and Ron was good-naturedly jeering at them and trying to part them, so they could get around to business of their own.

"Luna couldn't be here because she didn't want to leave Neville," Hermione began with tersely, "But we still think it's something to do with Ravenclaw, the last Horcrux, and we still think it's the lost diadem."

Careful examination of the identity of the Horcruxes over their last remaining months before the enterprise to Hogwarts had led them to believe that like Slytherin's locket and Hufflepuff's cup, the final Horcrux might be related to Ravenclaw, with Voldemort's obsession with the founders. Luna knew about the lost diadem from her father's lore, which Xenophilius had once tried to duplicate. It was the only notable relic of Ravenclaw.

The lost diadem was said to make the wearer wiser, like Rowena Ravenclaw herself, but to have been lost back in the days of the founders. Luna thought the Grey Lady, the Ravenclaw house ghost, might have some knowledge about the ancient history of Ravenclaw, so in an ideal world, their first step would be hunting her down and trying to pick her brain about the diadem. In reality, the situation they would be stepping into- a full-out assault upon Hogwarts- they might have to go directly to the Room of Requirement, where Hermione was convinced the diadem was hidden.

It was an old argument between them all now, whether to seek out the Grey Lady first or take their chances searching the enormous Room of Hidden Things for one small diadem. Luna knew what the diadem looked like from the statue inside Ravenclaw- Draco, the so-called Ravenclaw, had never paid that much attention- so she would have a chance of recognizing it, but it was a large room to look in.

"Somehow, I doubt 'Accio diadem' is going to work," Ron said gloomily. "Just imagine, the battle rages on outside, and long after the whole thing's over, we're still stuck in the Room of Hidden Things, searching over every inch for a bloody tiara."

"We have to go to the Grey Lady," Hermione said decisively. "If there's even a chance she has an idea where in the room it could be hidden- or even if I'm wrong, and it's hidden somewhere else- then it's a chance we've got to take."

A thought swam up in Draco, one that made him wish he had extracted yet more draughts of peace from Severus. "What if we don't have to find the diadem?" he said slowly, thinking for the first time of the blue loop in more detail, which usually pained him too much to do. "What if we can destroy it without finding it?"

"Then where do we shove the Sword of Gryffindor into?" Ron asked with charitable looseness, and Draco took a deep breath.

"We reproduce what happened there the last time to a tee, which must have worked because You-Know-Who did perish. However difficult it might be." Draco took a deep breath, then delivered his words that sounded like madness. "We destroy the Room of Hidden Things, and everything inside it."

The other three stared at him in blank silence for a long moment, as if thinking his megalomania had finally gotten to him- spending too much time with Dante after all, that one- only for Harry to look up with startled clarity. "The Fiendfyre, that Crabbe produced, that destroyed the room the first time. You want to do it again."

"Even though none of us know how to do it or how to control it," Hermione said breathlessly, and Draco shook his head and extended out his arms.

"I don't think Fiendfyre is meant to be controlled. I think it's just meant to destroy. And that's what we need it to do."

They eventually came to the conclusion that they would first try speaking to the Grey Lady, then looking in the Room of Requirement, then resort to targeting the entire Room of Hidden Things indiscriminately with Fiendfyre as their last resort. As they adjourned, Hermione pulled Draco to the side with a flutter in her voice and step. "Can I talk to you?"

"Of course," Draco said nervously, thinking she was going to admonish him for his readiness to risk using Fiendfyre, but he found himself met with a very different conversation.

"I think I'm going to ask Ron to have sex with me tonight," Hermione whispered, and Draco dropped his bag on his own foot.

"Striker!" Draco exclaimed. "Really?"

"Really," Hermione said, although she was biting her lip like she wasn't truly certain.

"Because this is the last night before the assault, and tomorrow we might all be dead?" Draco whispered back, and Hermione eyed him seriously.

"Partly," Hermione said softly, "But partly because I think I love him, Draco. And I don't see why we shouldn't."

The forthrightness of her words took Draco's breath away. "Then there's no reason you shouldn't. I mean, as long as you're brushed up on all the necessary charms-"

"I know contraceptive charms, and the rest," Hermione said, cheeks going pink with a delicate flush. "That's not a problem. I just need to be sure about this, that's all."

"If you love him, Hermione," Draco said, thrilling at the words after everything they had been through together, "Then if you want to be with him, you should be with him. And don't let anyone else's opinion stand in your way. Including mine."

Hermione seemed to light up, like she'd only been waiting for the permission his words seemed to give her that she wasn't doing something wrong. "You really think so, Draco?"

"I think," Draco said, "That you've come to the right person. If you're ready for some tips-"

"Oh, no!" Hermione wailed, covering her ears quickly. "No tips! No tips! I reckon we can figure it out ourselves, Mr. Know It All."

"Okay, then," Draco said, "Good luck, not that you're going to need it," and Hermione sighed and flung herself on him, a hug that tugged at the strings of his heart.

"I'm so glad you're my best friend," she said in his ear, and a part of Draco wanted to tell her-

This is one of the last conversations we're ever going to have. I'm going to die in two days, at the latest, and after that I will never get to hold you like this again.

Instead, Draco just replied, "I'm glad you're my best friend too."

Where Draco was headed after the meeting was unknown at first even to him. The impact of what he'd almost said to Hermione was spreading through him, turning his every step to misery and self-pity, hardly the emotions needed for tonight. He only realized once he arrived at the observatory that his steps were taking him to the moonstone sanctum, and thankfully no one was there to witness him making his way inside.

Draco's steps took him straight to the Mirror of Ecidyrue, its silver frame with its pitiless inscription unchanged, never to be changed, never a thing to be altered from the fate it demanded of him. He settled himself before it, staring at his own reflection waiting for it to show some sign of relenting towards him from Death, but nothing altered. Was it possible to defy the will of Death and live, if one only wanted to live badly enough?

He was being selfish even thinking of this. He had known all along, ever since he got into this alternate red line, that his mission was to ensure Harry defeated Voldemort, just like last time, and that everything else, including Draco and his fate, was superfluous. He'd known his job was to see his friends, his nine names, safely through the battle to come tomorrow, and that was what he would do before yielding himself up in Severus's place.

He'd never questioned his decision to do that since he made it, and he couldn't bring himself, much as he wished, to question it even now. He was looking at a doomed man in the mirror, and the best he could do was at least take his fate with grace the way Grindelwald had.

Someone who did everything with grace was standing behind him, reflection floating into view behind Draco's like an ethereal blessing. Dante with his dark curls loose and his iridescent robes had almost never looked more like an angel than he did suffused in the light of all the moonstones. When he spoke, his words sounded like the moonstones giving voice to their light.

"My love. How is it that even today, I find our steps lead us both together?"

"I don't know what you're doing here," Draco said curtly, hugging his arms around himself and wishing Dante's perfect reflection away from his own. "Unless you have something to do to fix the third mirror, I don't think there's much point to you being here either."

"You have caught me, darling," Dante mused. "I confess I am here to visit the mirrors, as I suspect are you. I wonder if they have yet more to give us, before we depart for Hogwarts."

"They have a fat load of nothing to give us, sorry," Draco said angrily, kicking out at the stand of the Mirror of Ecidyrue and only succeeding in hurting his foot. "I put all my faith in them, I risked my neck for them, and all they gave me was you."

Dante's lips twitched with amusement rather than hurt. "I am afraid I am indeed not enough to requite your efforts, my sweet dragon. You may punish me for that at your leisure."

"This is not a game, you know!" Draco exploded, turning on Dante with real ire. "Maybe it is for you, because you think you're so untouchable and invincible, even though Harry wiped the floor with your sorry ass, but for the rest of us this is our lives, Dante! We don't get another one like you did!"

"Do you think me uncaring of what happens to you, my darling?" Dante cooed, stepping closer with a propitiating air. "Quite the contrary. I simply hold enough belief in you not to panic. At least not yet."

"I'm not panicking!" Draco exclaimed, finding himself itching to pull his wand out against calm cool Dante and see if that ethereal acceptance would linger in face of that. "And you shouldn't invite me to punish you, Dante! You might not enjoy the results!"

Draco's attempts at playing the dark wizard were spoiled by their object. "Indeed?" Dante purred, taking Draco by the shoulders. "I find I rather like the sound of that."

Like Draco found himself doing so often around Dante, he was soon biting back tears. "Why are you so useless? Why don't you understand how much I have to lose?"

"Draco," Dante said more seriously, not letting him go, "I intend to stay by your side, for the entirety of the fight that I am not airborne-"

"No!" Draco shouted, glad the moonstone sanctum held in all the noise, because he would have been mortified at anyone but Dante seeing him this way. "That's not what I want at all! We have our business to do, with the Horcruxes. What I need you to do is to keep the other people I care about safe in the meantime, when I can't be there to protect them! Do you think you could do that for me?"

"Of course," Dante said smoothly, "If that is what you need of me. Killing if necessary?"

Sometimes the man was nothing if not predictable. At least he smelled nice. "Only if necessary. I don't want to come down from the Room of Hidden Things to find half of Hogwarts dead on the Great Hall floor."

Dante's lip twisted again, like he rather liked the vision that evoked, but he nodded solemnly. "Understood," he said, and brought up a hand to caress Draco's cheek before he let it go. "You know I would do anything for you, my love. Anything. I would kill, and I would show mercy."

Draco let out a discontented sigh, and Dante let his hand fall so he could press their foreheads together, lips only inches from meeting, but the contact was elsewhere, collapsing together, still just keeping up the taboo between them which neither would ever cross. Draco could feel Dante wanted to, though. He could feel Dante practically vibrating with how badly he wanted to cross the line and take Draco for his own before it was too late. There was desire there, dark and lingering.

"Kill, or show mercy? I imagine you'll have to do a fair bit of both tomorrow," Draco finally said, and let Dante press a kiss to his forehead.

"My lovely little dragon," Dante said softly. "It is getting late. Do you not think it far past time you saw your mother to say goodbye?"

Mother had recovered from childbirth admirably by now, not that Draco had been there to track the process. She greeted Draco from in bed, but only because the hour was late, and little Lucia was in her crib asleep already. She put a finger to her lips to shush Draco from waking the baby, then picked herself out of bed with a whisper of, "My son. I had not expected you so late."

"Well, tomorrow's a big day," Draco whispered, trying and failing to keep a sardonic tone from creeping in. "You see-"

"Severus already came and told me the attack on Hogwarts is tomorrow," she said in that low soothing voice, one that seemed self-sufficient without Draco. It was hard not to resent the perfect picture she and Lucia made, as if Draco had been neatly replaced by an innocent without any of Draco's catastrophic flaws. The only pity there was that Mother was unlikely to have the chance to raise up Lucia the way she wanted, to prevent those flaws in her daughter as well as her son.

"So. Yes," Draco said, trying to collect his thoughts back up again. He was acutely aware of all the things here he didn't want to say, and it was making him feel stiffly formal, like he was to be at perfect decorum for one of Mother's fancy dinners. "I've come to say goodbye, then."

"Because you fear you might not survive the battle," Mother said softly, eyes drifting from Draco to Lucia and back. "You told me that before. Do you remember what I told you?"

"That you had faith I would, because I'm a survivor?" *Wasn't Father a survivor? I guess not.*

"You are," Mother said with surety, and Draco thought, *I'm not, I know this is goodbye for good because even if I survive the battle, I'm not going to survive its aftermath, so these are the last words I will ever say to my mother.* He had made a stellar start so far.

"Maybe," Draco committed himself to saying. It was all he could do just to keep his tone constrained to avoid the cardinal crime of waking Lucia, or god forbid upsetting her like he had the last time. "But I want to say goodbye nonetheless, Mother."

"Goodbye, my son," she said in a rush, and leaned forward and kissed him on the forehead. It felt very different than when Dante had done it. He wanted to recoil away from her. "My handsome, brave son."

Draco didn't know how he felt about those compliments, not coming from her mouth. Perhaps she would have preferred it at times if he had been a little less brave, and had stuck to her side. "I'm sorry- I'm sorry we ended up on different sides, Mother. I never wanted it that way. I sent you that letter- I don't know if you remember- but just as you wanted me on your side, I wanted you on mine."

Mother took that quietly, perhaps like the implicit accusation it was. "I'm sure we both wish many things had worked out differently. I'm sorry they didn't. I just hope you know I have never stopped loving you, Draco, and I have never stopped being your mother."

Draco tried to take the words as anything but formulaic and hollow, he really did. Maybe the flaw was within himself, the disappointment that he had not been able to fix everything this time around in the red line. If anything, he'd driven his mother away and worsened things for her. If his side won, she would likely see life in Azkaban, away from Lucia. If the other side won, the Dark Lord would kill her. And Draco's interference had been what made that happen, rather than a future with Mother free and her life before her after the war, saved by the kindness of Harry Potter.

What was Draco supposed to say to her now, anyway? *I never stopped being your son, either?* It wasn't true.

"I'm sorry I'm not what you wanted me to be," Draco hedged, and she reached out and took both his hands in hers. They felt uncomfortably clammy, like perhaps this discussion was as difficult for her as him.

"You chose your own path," she acknowledged. "And all I wish for you now is your safety. That you can continue on in this path you chose, with those you love. I hope for that for you, my boy. I pray for it, more than you know. There is no resentment on my part. All of that is gone. I want your happiness now. I want you to live."

Draco closed his eyes shut tight. *Sorry that's the one thing I know I can't give you.* "I'll try my best." He felt her squeeze at his hands reassuringly like she had used to do when he was very young. "Mother- I'm sorry for torturing you. On the library tower that night, during the invasion of Xaphan. I'm sorry I cast Cauterizo on you so many times. I'm sorry I hurt you like that."

"All of that is gone, my son," Mother repeated with extreme firmness- with sure forgiveness. "I love you. All I want from you is for you to live."

"Are you sure you want to do this now?" Harry asked, and Draco nodded. "Seriously? Okay, sure, but... Protego!" Harry cried, as Draco lashed out with a half-hearted Expelliarmus. "Fine, fine, I'll spar you. Here we go."

They stood together in the nearest empty courtyard to their bedroom, in their pajamas. Draco had felt restless when he'd arrived there, so he'd dragged Harry outside for one last sparring match before the real thing began tomorrow morning. He hoped the tension that leaked from his pores would abate after a few good curses sent either way.

It didn't, and nor did he find himself particularly inclined towards wanting to hurt Harry in any capacity. He fought so spinelessly that even a half-hearted Harry had Draco's wand from him by his trademark Expelliarmus in less than five minutes, the talon wand no longer burning anyone else's hands as he took it. Harry gave it back to him with a reproachful look, as if wondering why Draco had dragged him out here if he wasn't going to put up a fight.

"Sorry," Draco said with a twisted grin, "I've got this anxious feeling, and I thought sparring might help, but it's not. Want to try a different way to cheer me up, dragonslayer?"

Harry did, predictably enough, and afterwards, Draco was at least tired out enough to have the illusion his misgivings had been dispelled.

Of course you have misgivings, you're going to be dead in three days. Just enjoy being close to Harry while you can.

"Harry, do you love me?" Draco asked, propping up his chin on his hand, and Harry, who was still a bit breathless, peered at him disbelievingly.

"Have I given you a reason recently to doubt it?"

"Will you always love me?" *Even if I disappear*?

"Of course I will. Forever," Harry said earnestly, then sighed. "Oh, right. 'Until the end of the war.'"

Draco's heart broke in its confines, but he smiled. "Until the end of the war," he agreed, and leaned his head on Harry's chest and let Harry's breathing lull him to sleep.

The Grey Lady

Chapter Notes

Hey all! To answer a question, I am writing these as I go along.

Thanks so much for all your comments, they really mean the world to me <3

Playlist

Harry and Draco rose not long past three in the morning, a trying hour given the exertions of the previous night in multiple senses, but they managed. They were out and ready for the assault earlier than most.

Ron and Hermione joined them soon after, coming from the same place together. Draco caught Hermione's eye and winked at her. She reddened and looked down, but was clearly pleased with herself.

Luna joined their group next, telling of how a wounded Neville had accepted staying at Xaphan only under duress, and how tear-filled their goodbye had been last night. "I really do love him," Luna said, sounding half-amazed by her own words. "Quite a bit more than I thought I did. I do hope I'll get to see him again."

"No Neville," Ron mused quietly, "Looks like someone else will have to kill Nagini," and looked hopefully down at where the Sword of Gryffindor was sheathed at Harry's side.

Amongst the more startling sights, that late night turned to early morning, was Gilderoy Lockhart, who turned up like the rest of them to the assembly point. But it turned out Gilderoy was resigned to his role now, and confined himself to wishing the best to the fighters. He went around administering hugs and handshakes to even those who barely knew him, expounding in a flowery tone upon their glory to come.

Draco gratefully took the embrace, needing every piece of reassurance he could have, however potentially spurious, and saw his friends do the same. It was only when Gilderoy ended up with Severus that Draco smelled trouble.

It was maybe four in the morning by then. Surely Gilderoy could not judge now as the opportune moment to finally make his public romantic gesture towards Severus. Still, Gilderoy might think this the last time he would ever see the man he loved.

There was no telling with Gilderoy, so Draco heaved a silent sigh of relief when Gilderoy constrained himself to a mere squeeze of the hand with Severus.

It was something like the handshakes Gilderoy had been handing out, but for the fact that it went on longer. But only a bit longer, and not long enough to cause public remark.

Severus's grateful eyes seemed to follow Gilderoy as he went, not quite as stoic as one might have expected, and Draco could read regret and fear for once on that indomitable face. It was enough to make Draco think suddenly, *Oh, Severus might really have feelings for him.*

But there was no time for sentimental thoughts such as those, as Moody finally broke away from Shacklebolt at the front and came forward to give them their instructions.

The assault had begun in reality with a look at the Marauder's Map, where the assault leader Moody could take stock of the positions of Death Eaters, and how many new Death Eater names were there from beyond Hogwarts. It turned out there were quite a few. Almost every known Death Eater name was within the walls of Hogwarts. Which suggested they were mustering there for their planned assault on Xaphan.

Or that someone in Xaphan could have leaked that the Order was coming. But no one spoke of that possibility.

"Once we have the wards down," Moody told the crowd of fighters, without specifying exactly how that was to happen, "We'll advance together into Hogwarts by the front steps. We expect fierce resistance, but we should be able to take the Great Hall to use as our base of operations. Is that understood?"

Such an enthusiastic roar came from below him, Moody frowned down at them like they were ill-behaved schoolchildren. "This won't be a bleeding picnic," Moody said roughly. "Expect to encounter Death Eaters who are aiming to kill."

"But once *we're* in, we'll have a mission of our own, right?" Luna whispered to Draco, who nodded tersely.

"That's right. We'll be heading straight to Ravenclaw Tower."

Luna smiled softly at his side. "It'll be just like going home."

They Apparated to the outskirts of Hogwarts and flew in on broomsticks under the cover of night, though signs of approaching sunrise were beginning to dye the sky. As expected, there was a perimeter beyond which none of them could fly, the raised protective enchantments of Hogwarts keeping out intruders.

Draco looked over to where Dante was dismounting his broom near the back and took in a deep breath. Now was where all of Draco's promises had to come good. Draco told himself he had faith in Dante to accomplish them- and to stop there, rather than try to accomplish his ancient promise of burning Hogwarts to the ground.

"Shaw!" Moody barked, and Dante backed up rather than moving forward towards Moody, and Draco realized, *Oh, that's the signal for him to do it, then and there. He's not going to*

wait a second longer, he's going to do it now...

Draco missed the actual transformation this time, so swiftly it was that Dante went from just one more fighter to a fire-breathing machine of destruction.

One person who did not seem to miss it, though, was Fred Weasley, whose gaze had whipped backwards at the sound of Dante's name, and nearly fell over at the sight that awaited him then. "What's happened?" George kept asking, gaze on a staggered Fred instead of the great shadow fallen over their group, and Fred was pointing with a shaking hand,

"Dante- Dante, he- he-"

"It's a dragon!" George whirled and declared, "Charlie, it's a dragon!" and the dragon whirled and took flight, taking his shadow over all of them as he lifted into the air and faced down the sight of Hogwarts with all its great and mighty towers.

Draco could just imagine Dante's thoughts inside that behemoth of scales and sunlight: how easily he could take this all down and raze it to the ground, like Malfoy Manor. Like Cathedral Reserve. Everything and everyone in it. It was one hell of a bargain Draco had made, assuming his Dante wouldn't do what he had always done before, when faced with the prospect of a good massacre.

Just like at Malfoy Manor, perhaps like at Cathedral Reserve, the beginning of the sunrise caught on Dante as he began his work, and Draco knew Hogwarts would never burn, or perhaps it could. It might not be a question of possibility, but will, as its burning hovered into being above it, iridescent opal-silver with great violet eyes that viewed its prey like any other prey. Vulnerable.

Dante roared out fire and Draco was almost relieved to see it meet an invisible barrier, the wards of Hogwarts holding at least at the first try to all of that flame and fury. Then Dante breathed fire again, circling over the spot over the towers he was targeting, and flame poured all down over the barrier, like a growing wall of fire. Many of the Order's numbers screamed in shock at the sight, but Shacklebolt mustered them all with his voice magically amplified: "Calm yourselves, stand back, all is well, this is *our* dragon..."

Maybe it had been necessary to keep it a secret from any spies who'd bring it back to Voldemort, but the reaction from their own shocked side was a thing to behold. Not that Draco or anyone else was looking much of anywhere except for up, where Dante flew above Hogwarts in a firework of opal flame. His head was long, with his snout fully forward, gray-purple eyes wide. Dante flapped his wings and wet palpitating shadow pulsed over Hogwarts like drums of war, before Hogwarts itself was obscured by the growing orb of fire around it.

The fire battered at the wards, both seemingly of endless magical power. Draco feared for the organization the Death Eaters might be amassing while Dante burned at the wards, but then, it was hard to imagine anyone near a window doing anything other than staring, as he was. Dante roared and the sound echoed over everything, and with another spurt of fire the air began to fill belatedly with silvery smoke.

Draco feared the wards wouldn't come down, until slowly there began to appear great green splinters on the face of the invisible barrier like cracks in an egg, places where the flame no longer seemed to be reflected. Dante aimed his flame high near the Astronomy Tower and more and more cracks began to appear before its lofty shape, as Dante soared around in a circle as he blasted. The fire turned bluer as he kept going, like he was casting Protego Diabolica in the air. Draco held his breath and watched the wards begin to fall.

Slowly, the cracks began to travel down, and Dante's orange-blue flame followed them, searing into the barrier until it gave way everywhere he breathed down the fire.

"Yes!" Draco cheered, and he could see Luna jumping up and down and clapping her hands beside him. Despite the fearsomeness of the sight, he could hear other members of the Order screaming and celebrating with them. They were at the very least going to make it inside Hogwarts.

If Dante left there a Hogwarts to get into. That was still an if, Draco knew.

It was happening piece by piece, and then it seemed to happen all at once. The barrier snapped, going a brilliant gold before sloping down and drooping in the face of the barrage upon it. Then it slowly disappeared, disintegrating before their very eyes, and the Order's cheer went up louder. If the Death Eaters were afraid at that sight, at that sound, then good. Let them fear. Fear was the only rational response to facing the side with Dantanian Noir on it.

And Dante did come to a halt. Incredibly, he stopped at the sign of the barrier falling. And perhaps he would have stopped breathing flame entirely, had there been no sign of the enemy coming through the felled barrier.

Flanked by the smoke, mere silhouettes at first, figures were coming out to face Dante. Four Death Eaters emerged to shoot curses up at the dragon. Draco recognized their leader as Dolohov, and could only wonder what suicidal mania must have possessed the man to attempt this. Perhaps it was sheer rage, at how easily their first line of defense had been decimated. Or a lack of understanding just what it meant to take on a dragon.

As retaliation, Dante breathed out a wall of flame towards them that had them screaming and scrambling backwards, Dolohov frantically barking for his companions to put out where his robes had caught aflame. Another wave of flame, though, and Dolohov caught completely alight. The other Death Eaters deserted him as they fled for their lives back inside Hogwarts, colliding with less brave Death Eaters assembled just inside, waiting.

"Go! Now's our chance!" Moody yelled, while they had the Death Eaters in retreat from Dante. "Go!" With a great battle cry, the Order of the Phoenix rushed forward, led by Moody and Shacklebolt, over the burning coals on the steps of Hogwarts and up towards the entrance.

Dante had to stop breathing fire and pull back, with his compatriots advancing through the space, but his flame had already done its work- and not just on the wards. One of the Dark Lord's fiercest fighters, murderer of Remus Lupin in another life, Antonin Dolohov's frantic screaming had barely been audible over the din, and now it came to a stop. Dolohov's burning

body dropped dead between members of the onrushing Order on Hogwarts' steps, ashes soon trampled underfoot in the great stampede inside.

They overwhelmed the Death Eaters there with sheer numbers, as the Death Eaters who had been on watch plus the Death Eaters who had managed to rush down to face them only made about nine. The Order was significantly more than that, of course, but only so many could come through at first, enough that small skirmishes erupted around the entrance hall, Remus and Sirius taking on Travers right before Draco while Severus and McGonagall cornered gray-bearded Gibbon to the side of them.

The Death Eaters had no natural leader without Dolohov with them, so no one called up the order to retreat as quickly as they sensibly should have. Draco could still see individual pockets of Death Eaters backing away towards the direction of the great staircase, realizing themselves outmatched. The urge came up in him to go for the kill- only meaning that as a metaphor, he swore, or at least he thought- following them while they were vulnerable and taking down the numbers that would be present for a fuller fight.

But Moody's priority was securing the Great Hall, so that was where most of the others placed themselves, while Harry and those at his side had other orders. First amongst the party of the Order to break out from the group were the seventh-years, who had been tasked with stealing off to the common rooms and beginning the evacuation of the non-combatant students there, lest the Death Eaters use them as human shields or worse.

Each party of seventh years had an adult member of the Order with them to guard them, and in the case of Harry's party, it was Remus who went with them, along with Tony, Terry, Padma, Michael, Entwhistle, and Millie. They were going to Ravenclaw.

Tony led them the fastest way to Ravenclaw, their feet pounding beneath them as they raced at top speed, ready at any moment for flying curses at them that didn't come. Remus seemed a bit breathless, but kept up with the teenagers in his charge, shooting reassuring looks at Harry and Draco as they advanced- even if their mission once they arrived in Ravenclaw would be different...

Draco held up the back of the party, wielding the talon wand ready for attack from behind alongside Hermione as Remus neared the door. The knocker asked Remus, "Where do conjured objects come from," and Draco held his breath.

Remus answered, "From not-being, that is to say, everything," and that mumbo-jumbo turned out to be right. Draco let out a relieved laugh as the entrance to Ravenclaw swung open, only to stop laughing when red light flashed out of the entrance.

They were finally encountering resistance.

Stephen Cornfoot, Draco's once-dormmate, was at the front of the common room shooting spells out at them, accompanied by all the seventh-year girls but Padma: Brocklehurst, Turpin, Li, and McDougal. Several sixth-years Draco didn't recognize had also joined them, while more student faces peeked out hiding behind chairs and tables.

"Stay away!" Cornfoot bellowed, and Michael let out a mighty snort, only to jump back as sparks flew his way too.

"Stephen, it's us!" Michael yelled, and Cornfoot went,

"Who's us?"

"Your old housemates, you plonker!" Michael called, but to no avail. The terrified Cornfoot had squeezed his eyes shut and was blindly shooting Stunners in the direction of the intruders.

"Who do you think we are, Death Eaters?" Padma yelled. "Mandy, what are you doing? Stop it, it's me, Padma!"

Brocklehurst hesitated enough for Remus to shoot out an Expelliarmus and Disarm her. The other girls screamed, clearly not fit for fighting as much as panic after a year under Death Eater tutelage, and Padma called out again, "Lisa, if you curse me, I'll never forgive you!"

Lisa Turpin dropped her wand into her pocket slowly. "Padma, is it really you?"

"It doesn't matter!" Cornfoot bellowed. "They've come to hurt us, all of them! You all saw the dragon!"

Of course Ravenclaw with its observation deck would have had a prime view of Dante. No wonder they were a bit testy in here waiting for someone to come kill and eat them.

"Okay, fuck this," Draco said to himself, then raised his voice. "Listen up, everyone, this is Draco Black! I'm one of you, but my patience is limited! If you surrender, you'll be taken to safety! So either you all drop your wands and surrender to me, or I'll loose the dragon on all of you!"

Remus turned to him as if he had truly gone mad, but after a mere moment's silence, there was the clattering sound of wands dropping to the floor.

"You really won't hurt us?" marveled Cornfoot, and Draco resisted the urge to belie his words by giving the resistance ringleader a good slugging.

Soon they had all made their way into the porthole and were explaining the situation to the terrified Ravenclaws. Remus handed a red-faced Brocklehurst back her wand, and she looked at the sight of Millie like she thought she might still need it. Draco inserted himself between the girls and began to bark out orders, finding the fear his name and presence evoked the best resource they had, even over Remus's calm and authority as a once-professor.

Ravenclaw had panicked, granted, but they were a smart lot, give them that. It didn't take long before their old prefects had them all marching out of the Tower in lines by year, headed down the back ways towards the Honeydukes exit to Hogsmeade. It must not have helped anyone's command of the situation, though, to have Luna asking them all wildly if they had seen the Grey Lady around. One might even have detected some murmurs of *Loony Lovegood.*

A third-year finally had the courage to whisper as she went past that she had seen the Grey Lady in the common room near the back with the rest of them, watching the dragon. So Draco, Harry, Luna, Ron, and Hermione parted ways with the others, leaving them to their charges and heading towards the mission of their own. Millie, who was with Remus and Tony heading up the back of the caravan of children, gave them a disturbed look, but went on.

They headed back to the common room and found the Grey Lady in the back behind the furniture, floating and contemplative. She began to float away through the walls as soon as she saw them, though, and gave them a fair chase out of the common room again and into the hallways. Once they finally had the Grey Lady cornered, she huffed and stopped floating away, looking a moment of irritation away from tossing her waist-length hair and rolling her eyes.

"Hello, Grey Lady," Luna said excitedly, and it became clear that the Grey Lady may not have been fleeing from all of them as a group, but from one of them in particular.

"Hello, Miss Lovegood," said the Grey Lady in a clipped tone, looking at the students that surrounded her as if still seeking an exit. "If this is about Rowena Ravenclaw's diadem, I've told you a hundred times, your father's foolish project to reproduce it will have no assistance from *I*..."

"We've spoken before," the others were told by Luna, who seemed to have rather salted the earth before them in terms of their necessary topic of discussion.

"You've been harassing her about the diadem already?" Draco asked incredulously.

"Last year," Luna said, "And it was only a few times, for Father. He had questions, you see."

"Ma'am," Harry said earnestly, "We're here to speak to you about the lost diadem of Ravenclaw."

Her annoyance was clear, and she would visibly have turned to leave, were they not all surrounding her. "I am afraid that I cannot help you," she said, as if for the thousandth time, and when they did not relent, she let out a long, uncanny breath. Draco felt the cold of it climb up his arms. "You are hardly the first students to covet the diadem. As I have told Miss Lovegood, generations of students have badgered me-"

"And I told you, I wasn't trying to find the diadem, my father wanted to make a new one-" Luna began, affronted as well, only for Harry to hold up a hand to quiet her.

"Yes, we are looking for the diadem now," Harry said bravely, "And we need you to tell us everything you know about where it is."

"Student after student has said the same to me, and yet *I*-"

"He isn't just any student, though, is he?" Draco cut in, hardly wanting to waste time bandying words with a ghost when they could be getting ambushed, or their friends could be dying below them, even as they spoke. "You know who he is. Don't try and act like you don't."

"Harry Potter," said the ghost, without what Draco thought the necessary reverence. "Of course I know Harry Potter. That does not change-"

"It changes everything," Draco said forcibly. "Do you think he would be asking you this for a trifle? For some father's cockamamie project?" He ignored Luna's offended little humph. "For good grades or better OWL results? No! He's asking you because of Voldemort!"

"It's about defeating Voldemort- or aren't you interested in that?" Harry finished for him coldly.

She did not answer at first, so long that Draco feared that perhaps, yes, she would rather like to assist Voldemort in his projects. Maybe old snakeface had made a friend in his stay at Hogwarts. But no, she was just spending the time to stare at Harry. An understandable project. "Do you know," she said slowly, "Harry Potter, that many around me at Hogwarts now have called you a killer and worse? Worse than that dark lord?"

"You're too smart to believe that, aren't you?" Ron asked carelessly, and her voice was heated as she replied,

"Of course! I was merely making the point- but it is no matter. What is it you need of me, Harry Potter?"

"Where is the lost diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw? I have a feeling you know more than you're telling us," Harry said cannily, and for the first time, the Grey Lady's composure seemed to fail her.

"It- it is not a question of-" she began. "My mother's diadem-"

"Your mother?" Hermione marveled.

"Her mother is Rowena Ravenclaw," Luna supplied helpfully. "She won't admit it, but I've heard it said by another ghost to her. Her name is Helena Ravenclaw."

Luna as ever seemed to be making herself the Grey Lady's least favorite. She leveled up a truly savage look at Luna, at odds with all her lofty, haughty demeanor, then stiffly replied, "Yes. My name is Helena Ravenclaw. But I cannot see how finding my mother's diadem would help Harry Potter-"

"That's our matter," Draco said coldly, getting the feeling of something wrong with this ghost. "You just need to tell us everything you know, and then maybe Hogwarts won't fall completely to a madman."

The Grey Lady waited, so long Draco was sure they would get nothing more from her, until finally, she said in a low voice, "I stole the diadem from my mother. I sought to make myself cleverer, more important than my mother. I ran away with it."

Draco recognized that voice at last, the voice that had so unsettled him: the voice coming from out of a deep, dark past, of which the owner no longer liked to speak, unless they were

forced to it by something or someone else. He listened raptly, as did the others, and hoped at least their attention would flatter her into full disclosure.

"My mother, they say, never admitted that the diadem was gone, but pretended that she had it still. She concealed her loss, my dreadful betrayal, even from the other founders of Hogwarts. Then my mother fell ill- fatally ill. In spite of my perfidy, she was desperate to see me one more time. She sent a man who had long loved me, though I spurned his advances, to find me. She knew that he would not rest until he had done so."

Luna seemed to vibrate with the need to say something, but Draco pressed a finger to her lips. Let the miserable tale of the past come out on its own, as the owner chose.

"He tracked me to the forest where I was hiding," went on the Grey Lady. "When I refused to return with him, he became violent. The Baron was always a hot-tempered man. Furious at my refusal, jealous of my freedom, he stabbed me."

"The Bloody Baron," Luna said, unable to contain herself, at Hermione's quizzical look. "It was the Bloody Baron who loved her."

"To my death," the Grey Lady said darkly, and showed them the wound in her chest that Slytherin's house ghost had left. One could almost see where Slytherins ended up getting such a bad name. "When he saw what he had done, he was overcome with remorse. He took the weapon that had claimed my life, and used it to kill himself. All these centuries later, he wears his chains as an act of penitence... as he should."

Well, say this for Slytherins. At least he was sorry for it.

"The diadem?" Hermione asked sharply. "What did he do with the diadem then?"

"He never found the diadem," she said, lifting her beautiful face proudly. "It remained where I had hidden it when I heard the Baron blundering through the forest towards me. Concealed inside a hollow tree."

"Where was this tree?" Harry asked intently, and she responded,

"A forest in Albania. A lonely place I thought was far beyond my mother's reach."

"Albania," Hermione echoed. "Where Voldemort hid all those years. She must have told Voldemort to go to Albania."

"I did no such thing-" the Grey Lady began indignantly.

"But you did tell someone where you hid it," Harry said forcefully. "Someone has to have known where you left it, and taken it, because it's not in that tree anymore, is it?"

"It was another student," the Grey Lady said hesitantly. "He was nothing like the man that calls himself Lord Voldemort. So handsome he was, and so charming... flattering to me, beyond all I can describe... he seemed to... to understand... to sympathize..."

"Was his name Tom Riddle?" Hermione asked flatly, and the Grey Lady nodded.

"That was Voldemort when he was young," Luna said, and the Grey Lady reared back in astonishment. "Don't be sad, Grey Lady. You aren't the only one who Tom Riddle has fooled."

"Did you help him retrieve it?" Ron asked eagerly. "Did you go with him to show him?"

"Any more beyond my tale, this... Lord Voldemort... must have done on his own. If he truly took the diadem, I have no idea what he did with it, or where it might be now."

An impressive silence greeted this announcement. "Well, this was a fat load of wasted time," Ron finally commented bitterly. "She has no more idea where the diadem is than we do. Less."

"It's not a waste of time," Hermione said, voice going shrill in her excitement. "We know our guesses were right. The diadem is the final Horcrux. Now we know exactly what we're looking for in the Room of Requirement."

"Grey Lady," Luna said, catching the Grey Lady with her words where the sad woman had been clearly planning to go. "Do you think you would know the diadem if you saw it again?"

"Of course," the Grey Lady said, ashamed and downcast. The revelation that Tom Riddle had been Voldemort seemed to have staggered her beyond endurance, even though she had no idea the depths of evil her decision had involved the diadem in as a result. "The diadem was my first and greatest love. I have never adored and coveted another thing, living or dead, like I adored the diadem."

"Then come with us," Luna said excitedly. "We know it's in the Room of Hidden Things, so come and help us find it!"

The Grey Lady seemed sure to demur, so Draco put the pressure back upon her. "Unless you want the diadem to remain exactly where Voldemort put it, thanks to you and your foolishness, Helena."

The Grey Lady drew herself upwards with a hint of that old haughty stubbornness. "I will go with Harry Potter to find it."

"We'll have to be vigilant," Harry told the Grey Lady as much as any of his companions. "We may have enemies anywhere. Everyone, keep your wands drawn."

"Already there with you," Draco said grimly, brandishing the talon wand. "Come on, Harry. Let's go find and-" He almost said *destroy that thing,* but none of them had told the Grey Lady they meant to destroy the diadem. Perhaps she would be less inclined to help them if she knew. He supposed that meant they were deceiving her, in a way. Well, perhaps she deserved to be deceived a bit, the way she had deceived her mother.

The six of them made a strange party as they inched their way slowly along the back corners and staircases of Hogwarts towards the Room of Requirement, five teenagers in a semicircle with their wands out flanking a stately lady ghost. She floated along with them without

seeming to take in their air of near-hysterical panic at the thought of being intercepted before their task could be done. It did figure, given that she couldn't be killed again.

Several times a sound startled them and sent them all whirling around brandishing their wands, only for Hermione to sensibly remind them they could expect sounds of combat from far away. None of the sounds were close enough to give alarm, though, and soon they arrived at the Room of Requirement. Harry paced before the doorway, thinking of needing to see the Room of Hidden Things, and soon the door opened to them, revealing the cavernous space of hidden things within.

"We'll never find it somewhere so big," Ron said bleakly, and Hermione whacked him on the arm.

"Not with that attitude!" she protested, and led the group of them inside the huge echoing chamber. "Accio diadem!"

Nothing happened, as they had always known it wouldn't. The Grey Lady floated in behind them, passing through Draco at one point and sending goosebumps through him. "You're certain it's here?" she asked breathlessly. "My lost diadem?"

Your mother's *lost diadem, you mean. What do you intend to do with it once you get it, hide it in another tree?*

The objects were piled up in walls of things with aisles between, like a great department store full of the detritus of centuries for purchase. Draco remembered how many times he had come here to work on the vanishing cabinet in the blue loop and desperately wished he had looked around a bit more. But there was no ancient tiara anywhere in his recollection, just walls of bleak unfeeling things, so many it could madden you. It was like a maze, if a maze had an entrance but no particular exit.

"Let's split up," Hermione said with a tone of rather desperate cheerfulness, and Draco obeyed, taking one of the aisles. He knew he spent far too much time looking at each object with his wand lit by it, but they weren't looking for a discarded Muggle automobile. The lost diadem on top of everything else was small, and he was terrified he would pass by it by mistake and ruin everything...

"How do you think we ever found it the first time around," Ron yelled out, "You know, Draco, in the blue loop," and Hermione let out a half-shout, half-yowl so loud that Draco nearly tripped into a display of books and broomsticks.

"That's it! Draco, you were there! You said you interrupted us in the act of looking for something, so *where were we looking*?"

"I don't know," Draco said helplessly, racing backwards out of his aisle to stare at the maze from the starting place again. "I think it was on the right..."

Then the Grey Lady had floated off towards the right. "I loved that diadem," she said, loudly and distinctly. "If it is near, I will *feel* it, calling towards me..."

Draco wasn't aware of the diadem having any such magical properties, but if it did, he would hardly be the first to complain. "Here, we were deeper inside the room," he said to himself, following in the direction of his own memory. It had taken them some time to escape the Fiendfyre, even on broomstick...

The Grey Lady ended up following him, as did the others, down multiple aisles and angles, no longer trying so much to see anything as to see if memory struck him. It had been so long ago...

And then the Grey Lady soared down ahead of him, a grand swoop like a Seeker descending on a Snitch. "It's here!" she declared rapturously. "I can feel it."

"Where?" Draco asked eagerly, sprinting to follow her as she went further down the row, only to alight at a dusty old cabinet.

The Grey Lady was maybe five feet from Draco as she indicated the diadem on one of the rows of the cabinet, looking as spellbound as Draco by the sight of what seemed objectively to be old and ugly, nothing like the gleaming thing in portraits of Rowena Ravenclaw. "This is it," she breathed. "This is the lost diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw."

"Thank you," said Blaise Zabini, and reached out and took it.

He had stepped out from behind a great mass of books. Pansy, Vince, and Greg followed, going to his side.

"Now why," Blaise said, voice carrying through the great cavernous room, "At a time like this, would Draco Black be after the lost diadem of Ravenclaw?"

The Lost Diadem

Chapter Notes

Fixed a mistake with the Grey Lady.

Playlist

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Luna came running to a stop at Draco's side. Facing them with the diadem in their possession were Blaise, Pansy, Vince, and Greg. The Grey Lady let out a cry of fear and fled the Room of Hidden Things without further delay. It was as if she could already sense what this massive room was about to become: a battleground.

A battleground that had ended in Fiendfyre, last time. Draco's breathing cut itself short at the mere sight of Vince, perhaps ready again to send himself and anyone Draco could not save to the netherworld-

"Remember, you two, the Dark Lord doesn't want Potter dead," Blaise ordered quickly, "So we're not aiming to kill anyone. And Vince, I know you're raring to try Fiendfyre, but you don't know how to control it, so I forbid it."

Huh. Maybe Fiendfyre was off the menu after all.

Draco wished that could quell his racing heart and mind at the sight of the Kingsnakes lined up against them. He tried for arrogance, in lieu of anything else to say to the four students whose identity they'd stolen at the start of the year, to such disastrous consequences.

"You're outnumbered," Draco called haughtily. "Don't you think you're biting off a bit more than you can chew?"

"Oh, I don't think so," Blaise said confidently. "You won't hurt me, not with this in my possession." He pocketed the diadem, watching how Draco and the other four's eyes all went to it helplessly. "And besides..."

"Stupefy!" Pansy yelled, and caught Ron unawares. In a flash, Ron had crumpled to the floor, unconscious, sending books crumpling down upon him.

"Ron!" Hermione cried out, only to whirl around with her wand in fear of a sucker blow for her as well. The four Slytherins laughed.

"Ron!" Luna wailed aloud, "You idiot!"

Pansy shrugged. "Guess we're not outnumbered anymore, Mudblood," she said casually, and smirked.

Harry broke the fragile impasse. "Mudblood?" he echoed. "You'll pay for that." Red light shot from his wand towards Pansy in retaliation, and she shielded herself. Vince and Greg leaped forward, shooting dark spells all at once, and shields came up hastily on Draco's side as well, books beside Ron falling over completely and making them all scamper away except Hermione. She flicked a stack of them away with her wand, seeming, despite Blaise's order of no killing, to be unwilling to leave Ron's side.

Draco lifted his wand, ready to annihilate his old friends at a duel if that was what it took, but then the Slytherins were outnumbered again. Blaise ran deeper into the Room of Hidden Things with his long legs sprinting away from them, a sudden blur abandoning his girlfriend and henchmen. "You want the diadem?" Blaise yelled. "Catch me if you can, Black!"

It was bait, but Draco fell for it all the same, running after Blaise with a dawning anger in his heart. He had to trust Harry, Hermione, and Luna to take on Vince, Greg, and Pansy. There would be no point to defeating the others if Blaise escaped with the diadem. And Blaise was smart enough to probably take it right to Voldemort... no, Blaise couldn't escape, whatever the cost...

Draco shot ropes after Blaise, trying and failing to catch him with Incarcerous. Blaise only jumped over the ropes and increased his pace, veering behind a huge mass of stacked-up tables that Draco nearly ran into before his Seeker's reflexes stopped him just in time. "Blaise, get back here!" Draco yelled in pure rage, unable to understand how Blaise was *gaining* distance on him. "Get back here and give me the diadem or I *will* kill you!"

Blaise hesitated running for just a moment, but then, Draco had stopped running too. There was about twenty feet between them where they both stood, motionless for that second.

"Like you killed Theo?" Blaise said angrily. "I'll take my chances!" He made a huge leap onto a pile of desks and crossed over one of the rows of the Room of Hidden Things, utterly baffling Draco's expectations.

Draco was reduced to shooting Oppugno at the opposite bookcase as Blaise kept gaining distance. He could hear Blaise cry out and the sound of tomes hitting flesh, so he climbed up and vaulted into Blaise's new row, gaining back ground for that moment before Blaise cast Reducto and sent all the books and a rush of air exploding backwards against Draco. Draco staggered back but kept his feet, racing after Blaise again as soon as he could. And then Blaise found a broomstick.

Blaise mounted one broomstick from a rack of them and took to the air, and Draco had nightmare visions of the diadem slipping from Blaise's pocket into an endless pile of miscellaneous things where they would never find it- replaced quickly by a nightmare vision of Blaise escaping the Room of Requirement entirely and taking the diadem to Voldemort.

Draco raced over and got a broomstick of his own, despite Blaise having knocked the stand over on his way out. It only delayed him for a second, leaping onto a broomstick inferior to his own Firebolt but enough to do the job, enough when Blaise was on a similar one, and anyway, Blaise had never been one of the Kingsnakes who played, just sat on the sidelines running plays. Draco could outfly him still, he was sure of it. Blaise had made a fatal mistake thinking he could escape Draco in flight.

Draco shot Impedimenta at Blaise as he soared over rows and rows of the discarded detritus of centuries, secrets never to be told. He didn't dare fell Blaise's flying figure completely. "Accio diadem!" he tried, but of course that spell didn't work in this room with its enchantments.

Draco found them getting closer to where the others were trading curses over Ron's fallen body. No one had moved very much since Draco and Blaise had left, and all six combatants were still on their feet, throwing out spells with vicious speed and intensity. He couldn't spare much of a glance downward, though, not without letting Blaise near the entrance-

But Blaise wasn't going for the entrance. Draco had feared him breaking off from the other Kingsnakes and absconding with the diadem, as would be optimal for Voldemort's side, but Blaise wasn't about to leave the others behind, outnumbered without him. He'd drawn Draco away from the fray for some time, enough to give his friends a chance to win the upper hand. But with that upper hand not materializing, Blaise dove his broom down to Pansy's side, where she shrieked his name and clung to him a moment before shooting a jelly-legs jinx that hit Luna and sent her stumbling to the floor.

They still hadn't learned well enough what happened to them when they went after Luna. Draco thundered down a Reducto at her, one that parted her and Blaise and sent her flying into a wall of bats that tumbled down upon her like the books upon Ron. She was soon out of her pile, though, and blocking Draco's Stunner, as she sprang forward somehow with the courage to take Draco openly on.

"Don't, Pansy, I'll take him," Blaise said, and Pansy pressed a hard kiss to Blaise's lips before saying,

"I've got this, Blaise. Don't worry. He's not that tough."

Draco could hardly let those words stand. Nor did he have to go as easy on Pansy as he had on Blaise. "Keep an eye on Blaise, he's got the diadem!" he screamed to Hermione, who nodded shakily before hitting the floor as red light spurted towards her.

Draco cast Sectilis procella in the direction of Pansy, who was backing away from him, and her shield managed to hold against it, but she staggered where she was walking. Draco cast Flagello and whipped at the path before her with his rope of flame- a sign that momentarily made him reflect, maybe they would have been better off taking Dantanian with them, but no, he had this himself. He could take Pansy Parkinson down in his sleep, whether or not he wanted to fight her at all...

He wanted to fight her, as he cast a series of dark curses at her, dispensing completely with any niceties. These were what she would have been learning at Hogwarts, after all. Flagello had left her shaken, but Ossio dispersimus hit her left hand and left it boneless, making her screech and screech. She shot back a Conjunctivo at him that just barely missed, her signature curse.

By his side, Hermione was dueling Blaise while Harry took on Vince and Luna took on Greg. Draco spared a glance for them- which was a good thing he did, as Vince managed to upset

an entire row of piled things on top of them, sending all three hurtling to the ground underneath, dazed.

"Oppugno! Flagrante!" Draco cast, making the objects fly out at the Slytherins and sear at their flesh, while he ran before his people to give them the chance to get up and fight again.

"Ron!" Hermione yelled, "Where's Ron," and had to dig him out of a deeper hole of papers and old broomsticks. Pansy shot Engorgio skullus at Hermione and it hit a bust of an old man instead, making his head swell out to massive proportions, before another bust animated against them attacked her.

"Black!" Pansy yelled in pure rage, tearing the bust in two with a flick of her wand that showed that she too had learned fire rope, and wow, despite the Ravenclaws' performance, Draco could only have compliments for this component of a Hogwarts education...

Luna was knocked with a blow to her head, too stunned to fight for a moment. Harry kept his body between her and the Slytherins as they finished obliterating the objects Draco had sent against them and turned back towards trying to disable Harry Potter's party. Draco could only watch helplessly as Vince caught Hermione with Praefoco, beginning to choke her from a distance, with his clear shot at Vince blocked by the bulk of Greg.

So Draco went straight through Greg, shooting Expulso at Greg and making him fly right back into Vince, where the blue explosion over Blaise and Pansy blinded them for a moment.

"Thanks!" Hermione called shakily, feeling at her throat which had been so mercilessly contracted, and then the battle began again.

Luna could finally breathe again, although her chest was heaving for breath as she staggered forward towards the fray, only to be caught by a Stunner by Blaise that laid her out on her back. "Luna!" Draco screamed. "Blaise, you'll pay for that!"

"I don't think so!" Blaise crowed in victory, jumping back from Harry's retaliatory Expelliarmus and laughing, only for Hermione's Expelliarmus to send his wand flying into a nearby pile of newspapers. Blaise panicked and ran for it, and Draco called Lacarnum inflamari and set the newspapers and hopefully Blaise's wand alight with them. Maybe this was the turn of the fight for them, even with Luna down-

Blaise with an inhuman scream at his searing fingers recovered his wand from the burning newspapers, and then Draco's group was outnumbered again, backed up in front of Ron and Luna's felled bodies protectively. Draco considered casting Protego Diabolica, but he knew this was a fight they could not run from. They had to win if they wanted the diadem back, and nothing in the entire world meant more at this moment than getting the diadem back-

Except maybe something did.

"STOP!" bellowed a baritone female voice that all the Kingsnakes, including Draco, were used to obeying unconditionally. It was a voice that had used to call plays from Viktor Krum's books for them, back in another world.

"Millie?" Pansy said wonderingly, pulling her wand back. Draco could see now that Pansy was covered in bruises from their fighting, and that there were tears of exertion or pain on her dirtied cheeks. She was holding her boneless hand close to her body protectively, much like Blaise was holding his burned hand, and suddenly they did not look the fearsome obstacle they had only a second ago.

Nor did Vince and Greg. Draco had no idea how it had happened, but Vince's entire right side seemed to have at one point been on fire, to judge by the state of his robes. Both were bruised and bedraggled from flying across the room, much like Draco's people were beaten up from the falling objects that had hit them. Hermione had a cut Draco only saw now across her cheek that made Draco want to kill someone anew. Harry's glasses looked like one of the lenses had been cracked.

Draco walked up to Harry in the lull in fighting Millie's arrival had caused, and cast Reparo on Harry's glasses. They were right back to normal in a second, and they both could turn to regard a breathless, furious Millie who had them all at a standstill suddenly.

"Millie? What are you doing here?" Blaise asked, sounding genuinely uncertain, so there went Draco's wild theory that Millie had secretly been working with the Kingsnakes the entire time.

"I saw the four of you sneaking along after Potter and them," Millie said gruffly. "I would have come in sooner, but I couldn't figure out how to get this damned room to let me in." Draco reflected Millie was new to the Room of Requirement, and wondered how thankful or cursed they should feel that Millie had finally figured it out.

"We had a hunch Draco might go back to Ravenclaw," Pansy told her, "So we went off even though the teachers said not to, and posted up outside there. And they did come out of it, all by themselves with this ghost..."

"Ghost?" Millie said blankly, before gathering herself. "That doesn't matter right now. What matters is, what are the lot of you doing?"

"Fighting for our lives, Mills, ever heard of it?" Blaise answered with barely concealed malice, and Millie's eyes dropped to take in the Stunned forms of Ron and Luna. It surely did look like that.

"Why?" Millie demanded. "Why do you have to fight?"

"Because Blaise has taken something we need-" Draco began, only to be silenced by a glare from Millie like she was the schoolmaster in front of a room full of unruly children.

"I wasn't asking you," Millie said fiercely. "Why did you have to do all this, Blaise? Why did you have to go after Draco? It seems to me there's only one way this can end, and we all know it."

"You mean in another body dropping?" Blaise spat. "That would be on him, not us. We know the Dark Lord wants Potter and Black alive, so..."

"Since when were you such a devout follower of the Dark Lord?" Millie asked Blaise in amazement. "You always had so much ambition higher than that. I never saw you as some cringing lackey, risking your hide for someone else's orders-"

"Draco killed Theo!" Vince cried out, and there was the rub. Of course it was. The four Slytherins who had attacked them all drew themselves up in front of Millie, thoroughly convinced now of the righteousness of what they were doing.

"It's not too late, Millie," Pansy said shrilly. "It's not too late to join our side. Join us and we can beat them, just look at the state of them. Fight with us and the Dark Lord will reward you-"

"As if I care about that-" Millie said contemptuously.

"Fight with us and avenge Theo," Blaise said eagerly, and Millie let out a discontented huff.

"Do you all think I don't miss Theo? Each and every day?"

"Then why did you choose their side?" Pansy demanded. "Why are you standing by them, keeping us from attacking them? *Why won't you join us*?"

"Because it has to end sometime!" Millie screamed, and everyone fell deadly silent and still. Millie looked to be fighting back tears at the idiocy of all of the people around her. "Draco killed Theo's father, so Theo tried to kill Draco, so Draco killed Theo, and now you want to kill Draco by taking him in to the Dark Lord- you know it would, that's a death sentence- and where does it all end?"

"Draco, dead by the hands of the Dark Lord," Greg was brave enough to venture, and Millie stomped her foot.

"No! You think there's no one who'd come after you for Draco's sake? You think he isn't loved too, the way Theo was? It's all just going to come down to more and more killing for no reason anymore and when does it ever stop?"

"But Millie," Blaise said, voice almost pleading for her to understand, so badly it seemed they wanted Millie to come over to their side, "Theo was my best friend."

"And doing this won't bring him back!" Millie yelled. "Don't you get that? No matter what you do, no matter who you hurt, no matter how you throw your lives away, Theodore Nott is never coming back!"

Pansy began to cry, a harsh gritty sound that pulled at Draco's chest. He was still as the grave, trying to understand what was happening, whether what Millie was doing was working, as were they all.

Except, bless her, Hermione, who was quietly Enervating Ron and Luna behind them.

"It's too late, Millie!" Blaise yelled back, sounding full of impotent frustration. He hadn't put an arm around his crying girlfriend. "It's too late!"

"How is it too late?" Millie called desperately. "You were just telling me it wasn't too late for me to switch to your side! How is it too late for you to switch to mine? Because, you fucking idiots, *mine is the winning side*! Potter is going to kill the Dark Lord and then you'll all be left with nothing! Worse than nothing! You'll be going to Azkaban with the Dementors back while Draco gets to live out his happy life with Harry Potter!"

"You don't know that!" Vince called valiantly, but the vision she conjured seemed to have shaken all of them.

"The Order has the Death Eaters outnumbered," Millie went on mercilessly. "They have a fucking dragon. This fight was over before it ever began. You're not going to avenge Theo, you don't have a chance in hell of ever taking Draco down. Just stop fighting!"

No one did or said anything for some time, and then Blaise stepped forward. "Millie," he said, voice shaking. "Are you sure of that? That Potter's side is going to win?"

"Blaise, what are you doing?" Pansy called tearfully, and Blaise ignored her.

"Sure as the grave," Millie said flatly, and Blaise took his wand and put it back into his pocket.

"Blaise!" Pansy screamed, and Blaise reached into his pocket, took out the diadem, and handed it to Draco.

"I've had enough," Blaise said softly. "Millie's right, I'm more than some madman's lackey. I'm not fighting anymore."

Draco grabbed onto the diadem quickly, unable to believe his luck. He nodded with respect to Blaise, who crossed his arms and turned to Millie.

"What now?"

"Now," Hermione said, voice considerably firm under the circumstances, "There's an exit from the Room of Requirement to the Hog's Head in Hogsmeade. We can show it to you. Take it. Get help for your wounded hand, before anyone comes asking where it came from."

"Get the hell out of this fight," Draco said harshly, and Hermione nodded.

"It's a brave thing you're doing," Harry told Blaise, and Blaise shook his head wanly.

"No, it's not."

"BLAISE!" Pansy shrieked, and ran forward and clung to both his hands with hers. "Blaise, no! Don't leave us! Don't leave *me*!"

"Come with me," Blaise said intently to her, then lifted his head to Vince and Greg. "All of you. Come with me. Let's get out of Hogwarts, get fixed up, wait it out. Come on, it's the smart thing to do."

Vince and Greg looked quite unused to debating any orders Blaise gave them, but this seemed to be a sticking point. "Our fathers," Vince said slowly, and Greg nodded. "We can't leave our fathers."

"What about Theo," Pansy kept asking wildly, "What about Theo," and when Blaise tried to let go of her hands, she grasped onto him all the more feverishly, tears running freely down her distorted face again. "What about Theo, Blaise. What about Theo."

"It's too late for him," Blaise said with surprising tenderness. "It's not too late for us, Pansy. I want to have a life, a real life. I want us to have one together. Come with me and we can have that."

"TRAITOR!" she shrieked, jumping back from him with a shaking fingertip pointed in his face. "BLOOD TRAITOR!"

"Pansy," Millie said tiredly, "You have to know with just you and Vince and Greg, you can't beat them, can you?"

"Not with you on their side," Pansy said resentfully. "Not with *Blaise* on their side."

"Then if you aren't going to come over to our side," Millie said heavily, "I think you need to get out of here. Now. Before Draco changes his mind about showing you three any mercy."

Draco let the three of them run out, with their harsh heartbroken cries. Mostly, he was just glad they were all alive, and none of them had cast Fiendfyre.

He still had the diadem in his hand, digging indentations into the flesh with how hard he was holding it. Then he turned to Millie and Blaise. "Thank you," Draco said, and Blaise shook off Draco's handshake attempt roughly.

"Don't touch me, murderer," Blaise snapped, and waited for Hermione to show him the way out of the Room of Requirement. Once the steps were visible for him, he didn't look back once.

"What's going on?" Ron finally asked, "Why did all the Slytherins leave?" and Hermione gave him a fond but troubled look.

The others gathered around Draco, including Millie. "What is that thing he gave you?" Millie asked curiously, and after what Millie had just done for them, Draco found himself disinclined to lie or fob her off.

"Harry," Draco said, "Can't we just tell her what we need to?" Hermione looked incredibly alarmed, but Harry nodded. "Millie, this is the lost diadem of Ravenclaw. We need to destroy it."

"At a time like this?" Millie asked, and her sharp eyes focused then. "It must be awfully important to destroy it, then."

"If you've chosen now to switch sides again, Millie, you have superlatively poor timing," Draco said tiredly, and Millie shook her head.

"I'm just curious," she said, "But that's alright. How do we destroy it? Just with a spell?"

"No," Luna said, "It has to be the Sword of Gryffindor," and found a table that was relatively flat and undamaged nearby. "Here?"

"Here," Draco agreed, and laid the diadem down where Luna indicated.

"The Sword of Gryffindor," Millie marveled. "You really are like heroes from a fairytale. Is that the real thing?"

"It had better be," Ron said grimly, as Harry unsheathed the sword from his side and lifted it in the air. Draco expected at any second something or someone to impede them, to snatch the diadem or sword out from under them and take away their last chance to end this part of Voldemort. But nothing interfered.

Harry brought down the Sword of Gryffindor upon the lost diadem of Ravenclaw. There was a horrid screeching sound that keeled through the air. Millie, who hadn't been present at the destruction of the last Horcrux, jumped back in alarm, while the others just watched on grimly. When Harry lifted the sword, the diadem had cracked in half, any lingering light in it gone. Blood poured out from the sides of it, brackish black blood.

It seemed such a small thing to have contained so much evil inside it.

"We're done," Draco told Millie. "It's destroyed. That's all we need."

"What now?" Millie breathed, seeming to grasp something of the awfulness of what they had just ended from this world.

"Now," Harry said, sheathing the Sword of Gryffindor, "We find the others. And we fight."

The Battle of Hogwarts

Chapter Notes

Playlist

They raced down from the Room of Requirement in the direction no sane person would go: *toward* the fighting. Millie went with them, and it was doubtful she would be *talking* at any more of the enemy. They all had their wands out, and with every empty hallway, Draco's dread grew as to what they would find when they finally rejoined the battle...

Ron and Hermione led the way. "I can't believe they Stunned me right at the start of the fight," Ron called sulkily as they went, "What a humiliation," and Hermione gave him a good whack to the arm.

"Now's your chance to redeem yourself, Ronald Wea- oh my *God*!"

It was not Death Eaters they first faced, but spiders. Ron and Hermione both screamed their heads off at the sight of broken wall and an Acromantula crawling through. There was a line of spiders climbing up the side of the tower to join their leader, and Draco himself felt seized for a moment with overwhelming, impotent panic.

Then Harry stepped forward and sent a Stunner at the first spider, who crumpled and fell upon the others, but it wasn't enough. More spiders were whacking with their terrible claws at the stone and widening their path, so they could make their way in beside each other. Luna, Ron, Millie, and Hermione all shot Stunners too, and a couple hit spiders in the face and made them fall, in the way of their compatriots, but it still wasn't enough.

"Lacarnum inflamari!" Harry called, setting a group of spiders on fire. Draco watched him spellbound, trying to think...

Draco closed his eyes, then stepped forward. "Ventus tria!" he shouted, and a tornado made of what had always looked like blood erupted from his wand. Winds swept in a circle around them all, so hard Luna had to cling to Harry to keep from being swept away. Ron grabbed onto Hermione and watched as the tornado gathered force.

The tornado smashed into the onrushing spiders and sent them all flying downwards, a monstrous squalling heap of legs that hit the ones below them like dominoes. Draco tried to direct the tornado down towards the falling spiders but found it had gone out of his range. He'd lost control of it, and surely more would come...

"Come on!" Harry yelled, gesturing for them to run forward away from the breach, and they all followed him, their leader in battle. As they reached the end of the corridor, they came

face to face with McGonagall, who had enchanted a mass of desks to follow her like weapons of war. She was disheveled and bloody but indomitable as she led them forward past them. They all had legs that ran to keep up with the surprisingly speedy McGonagall, animated by the spirit of combat like Athena in the heavens.

"CHARGE!" McGonagall screamed, and Ron let out a wondering laugh.

"Those spiders aren't going to know what hit them," he said, and Hermione pulled him down the next staircase.

Draco had to pull Luna back from nearly falling over a trip step, then nearly tripped himself and fell at the sight of the chaos he had been expecting finally unfolding before him. Everywhere he could see were Death Eaters, some with masks, some bare-faced. But everywhere they paced, shouting their hateful spells, there were members of the Order and students to face them.

Fred and George were the nearest, having somehow fallen into dueling their old friends Travers and Selwyn who had taken them hostage at Nott Manor. Fred was shooting waves of red light in the direction of Travers while George shielded against Selwyn's Aruspices mitte; the curse deflected and hit a nearby Death Eater, who began to violently expel his guts onto the stone.

Fred and George made a good team, but they were not fighting their old kidnappers alone. Beside them shooting curses with the best of them was-

"PETER?" Draco cried in disbelief, coming to a stop where he had been running at the sight of his least favorite Weasley, the Ministry toady, fighting alongside his brothers. The duel stopped for a second in sheer confusion, as no one technically named Peter was in attendance. Nor did Travers or Selwyn seem to want to face down the feared Draco Black. The two of them began to inch away.

"Who the fuck is Peter?" Millie asked blankly.

"My name," the eldest Weasley seethed, "Is PERCY!" and shot a lightning curse where Travers and Selwyn had been beginning to flee. The two cowardly Death Eaters screamed and jumped aside, before turning with dread to face the huge group of students before them.

"Don't worry, we've got this!" Fred called confidently, and Draco hesitated along with Ron, remembering the blue loop, no doubt called to Ron's mind too, with the fateful tidings written in the seventh-year notebook of Fred's demise. But there was no sign the Weasleys didn't have the current fight under control, so Draco was forced to speed up to catch up with Harry, who was leading them to the marble staircase down to the entrance hall.

Draco had to see Remus to be sure he was still alive, even with Dolohov dead. He had to see Sirius too, had to see him there fighting. He had to see everyone he loved and keep them in his sight, so green light would not come and end their lives without him there to save them. He felt the impossibility of being everywhere at once as they half-ran, half-slid down the marble.

Millie screamed Ginny's name, seeming to finally see her beloved, although Draco hoped she wasn't distracting her for a fatal second. But no, Ginny was there to embrace and kiss a running Millie right at the foot of the stairs before the two of them turned to face the masked Death Eater Ginny had been fighting together.

There were more Weasleys nearby, perhaps having been looking after their sister and waylaid: Bill Weasley was dueling Avery, while Charlie was advancing against a masked Death Eater. When Bill tripped and fell, Ron managed to get a clean shot to send out a fireball between him and Avery to give Bill time to get to his feet. Bill leapt to his feet with a grateful grin for his little brother, even if it looked to have singed off a ginger eyebrow.

Dante was in the corner fighting three masked Death Eaters at once. Fred would likely have loved to rush to his aid if he could have. Draco for his part did not doubt Dante's ability to emerge victorious by himself, and left the sight.

He could hear Vince shouting, and felt a terrible surge of guilt for letting him go and not Stunning him as he saw him leveling blue light at Dean Thomas. Dean was shielded by Seamus Finnigan, though, who faced off with Greg with more bravery than luck. Greg caught Seamus while he was shielding Dean with Crucio. Draco darted forward, but Harry held him back. There were too many bodies in between...

An explosion erupted between Harry and Draco and the other three, sending them all flying through the air in opposing directions. Draco landed in a heap with Harry on the floor of the entrance hall, the world reduced for a long moment to nothing but flashes of legs running back and forth past them and lights through the air in many colors. Then Harry was pulling Draco up, shouting after the Death Eater who had made the explosion, Rookwood, who fled the sight of Harry and Draco.

"Where are the others?" Draco called frantically, but there were too many bodies between them now, darting and rolling in duels of their own. Draco could see Vince caught by an Expelliarmus from Dean, only for his father to run and stand between his son and danger.

Crabbe advanced on Dean and the still-writhing Seamus, only to be caught in the back by a Flipendo that threw him plowing into Goyle, who had been locked in close combat with the Patil twins. Flitwick sent Crabbe flying through the air above the other duelers, but Draco had no eyes for anyone but their companions they had lost in the explosion.

"Ron? Hermione? Luna?" Draco screamed desperately, but then there was a body before him at last who did not seem to fear to challenge him: big ugly Alecto Carrow, who was flanked by her bigger, uglier brother.

"Black!" Amycus barked, and shot right at Draco with green light.

Draco dodged downwards, running forward to cut off Alecto at the knees, while Harry threw himself into battle against Amycus with the rage of him having just tried to kill Draco. "You fool, the Dark Lord wants Potter and Black alive!" Alecto screamed at her brother as she shielded Draco's Lacarnum inflamari.

"They played a dirty trick on us! One I won't forgive!" Amycus declared, shooting out a wave of water at Harry in response to the fireballs flying his way. Harry, for one, looked as though he wasn't inclined to forgive the time Amycus had spent with a Polyjuiced Draco during that adventure. That and the Avada Kedavra he had just seen fit to let fly.

Draco dedicated himself to pinning Alecto in, so she wouldn't be able to escape him. When she dodged backwards, he sent Deprimo her way, carving out the floor around her, and then sent fire to line the indentation. It wasn't as easy as it would have been, had he still been a pyromancer, but he managed.

She didn't respond the way he expected, trying to put out the fire the way her brother had. She outright panicked. "Amycus! Help me!" she shrieked, trembling in her confines, while Amycus shielded against Harry's explosive power.

"I'm busy, you wretch," Amycus panted, perspiring from effort as Harry threw out ball of fire after ball of fire against his shield. One rebounded and set a nearby Death Eater on fire. That happened to be Mulciber, who was dueling Severus, and had already seemed in dire straits against Draco's godfather. The fire at the base of his robes sent Mulciber fleeing screeching across the entrance hall, with Severus in hot pursuit, soon disappearing...

"Stupefy," Draco said, and had to save Alecto Carrow from the fires he had made as she collapsed downwards, her bulk making it difficult to catch her with his wand and prevent her from falling face first into flame.

"Alecto! You'll pay for that!" Amycus screamed with real intensity, but what was clearly false bravado given the situation. He simply did not have the arsenal to face up to Harry Potter, let alone with Draco Black with him, and he showed he knew that as he turned on his heel and made to flee-

Only to fall over onto the last person- if person was the right word- you ever wanted to fall onto. Fenrir Greyback was in his werewolf form, chasing Lavender Brown across the entrance hall, but his progress was arrested by the stumbling of Amycus Carrow, who tumbled head-first onto him and pinned him to the ground with his weight.

Greyback showed no mercy. His claws and teeth came out and he began to maul his side's own headmaster.

"Should we help him?" Harry asked in Draco's ear, come up beside him looking unscathed and magnificent, and Draco laughed and tossed his head back scornfully.

"Oh, please... wait! Wait, look..."

Remus passed by them, the one person Draco had feared for most, dueling with Rowle, who hardly had to inspire paralyzing fear, while Sirius dueled Jugson in the vicinity. Then Fenrir Greyback picked himself up from the unresponsive body of Amycus and seemed to recognize Remus. Remus surely recognized him, from the way he drew himself up stiff and pale, wand held high like a beacon against an overwhelming darkness from the past. But there was still Rowle, coming up behind him for a sucker blow with Remus distracted-

Sirius shot a full body bind at Rowle and the huge blond Death Eater crumpled to the ground right behind Remus, saving Remus before Draco or Harry had to. "Go on, you two, we have this under control!" Sirius yelled, and Draco hesitated, the vision of Greyback mauling Remus like he'd mauled Carrow going through him in a rush of terror-

Remus executed the spell with perfect clarity, the one he had used on Peter Pettigrew in Severus's rooms on that fateful day they unmasked the rat. Suddenly Greyback was no longer a werewolf but naked and human again, blinking and turning around to try to understand what had just happened to him. Sirius and Remus both shot Stunning spells at Greyback, who hit the floor and crawled to escape them like he was still a wild animal.

Sirius turned to send Jugson flying across the hall with Expulso before advancing further on the nightmare of Remus's childhood, who was struggling to produce a wand from somewhere, Merlin knew where, and Sirius and Remus had him-

Only for the great wooden doors to Hogwarts to burst open where they had already been damaged by dragonfire and reveal the horde of Acromantula. The spiders made for the humans, on whichever side they hailed, and the battle turned from intense dueling between humans to a desperate struggle of all against the carnivorous spiders. Draco could see Fenrir Greyback struggling desperately to keep from being dragged under their great black tide...

And then there was a flash of green-brown scales behind the Acromantula horde, one nearly dwarfed by their numbers but unmistakable after the attack in Godric's Hollow. "Harry!" Draco called desperately, dragging Harry towards the spiders, towards where he had seen the snake. "Harry, it's Nagini! We have to go after it!"

"You saw Nagini?" Harry said breathlessly. "Cast the tornado again, Draco..."

They began their headlong rush *into* the spiders, what must have seemed a special kind of madness to any of the fighters watching, with Draco casting Ventus tria and sending spiders flying through the air in a typhoon. More screams erupted around the hall as the spiders landed every which way through the hall, some on top of people, but Draco had no time to worry about anyone but Nagini.

That was, and Harry, who was fighting through the spiders with bursts of Arania exumai in blue and white from his wand, narrowly avoiding at one point being caught by Draco's blood tornado himself. Draco quickly lost sight of Nagini through the horde, until finally they seemed to reach the other end of the swarm, down outside Hogwarts now, and Draco caught another glimpse of those green scales-

Only for a foot nearly to stomp down upon both him and Harry, ending the hopes of the wizarding world with a single step. There was a giant above them, smashing the windows of the hall and setting about tearing Hogwarts apart. He was also going through any human he could find in the process. He leaned over to seize a screeching masked Death Eater in his hands and tore him bodily in half like Dante had with teeth.

"GIANT!" Draco screeched to Harry, who rolled away from the foot and picked himself up, grabbing Draco and tearing with him past the other planted foot. They only came up to the

massive beast's ankles, so it was imperative they get out of range of the twenty-foot giant, and Draco ran for his life with Harry. Except then there was another giant.

"HAGGER?" yelled the giant, and Draco prepared for swift death with the philosophical meditation that, well, he'd only been going to last about two more days anyway-

"Draco, that's Grawp! He's a friend!" Harry said nonsensically, taking Draco by the hand and pulling him along past the side of the giants.

It figured that the giant *friend* would be the small one. Grawp let out a roar that called the attention of the larger giant, who abandoned his window and people-smashing to go try for some Grawp-smashing. Steps that had been turned to rubble by dragonfire broke apart completely under the larger giant's footsteps as he advanced on Grawp, and then in a shower of broken stone at Harry and Draco, the two giants were fighting right before them, too damned close-

"Come on!" Harry called to Draco, and they ran away from the site as fast as they could.

"We can still get Nagini!" Harry yelled, "I think she went that way," gesturing towards the Forbidden Forest, before freezing at a sensation Draco suddenly knew as well, deep in his bones: the worst feeling in the world, save the thought of losing someone he loved. It was the feeling of utter hopelessness, that nothing he ever did or tried to do would change a thing, and he might as well give up because the cold was seizing upon him and was going to swallow him whole...

Dementors were descending upon Hogwarts.

They made a fearsome sight, the Dementors, a great swarm of them like one would face at Azkaban in the days they still guarded it, their dark figures with slender limbs protruding like phantoms of the deepest night. They moved as if compelled by the same voice, advancing towards the castle. Harry grabbed onto Draco's arm and breathed, "Patronuses, Draco, come on..." even though he seemed possessed with more fear than he had yet shown today combined...

"No," Draco said, remembering the vial of Pensieve memories, remembering Dante assaulting Azkaban and how he had used a certain spell to not only drive back the Dementors but end them. "No, Harry, I'm not going to use a Patronus. PROTEGO DIABOLICA!"

Draco waved his wand in the midday sun and blue fire came out, his pyromancy not needed for this. He conducted the fire as beautifully as he could, thinking of Grindelwald, of Dante, of times before he had done it himself. He thought of Aunt Bella's face livid behind blue flame as he closed himself away from her.

He had just enough time to draw the blue circle of flame around him and Harry before the Dementors advanced upon them specifically, sensing their fear, two souls close by waiting to be feasted upon. But no dark visions descended upon them with the protection of the blue wall of fire, nor did the Dementors reach them.

It was what Draco had learned from Dante, along with so much else. Because of him, he knew how to create Dementors, and he knew how to destroy them.

Unholy screeches began to fill the night as Dementors tried to pass the barrier of fire and set themselves alight, acrid black smoke ascending into the sky. These did not seem to learn very fast, as the demise of others of themselves just seemed to attract more to make the attempt, as dozens of Dementors swam forward through the air and flung themselves to their doom...

"Draco, what have you done?" Harry asked.

"What does it look like?" Draco bragged, watching more Dementors bite the dust as they came up against the barrier. The thick black smoke in the air was so plentiful now, Draco could barely see Harry, but he could feel him. "Kill Dementors."

"You," Harry said, with barely stifled awe in his voice, "Are the coolest person I have ever met."

The Dementors seemed to wise up as a collective eventually, some of the remaining ones gathering in a knot and fleeing backwards into the forest, only for them to have to slide around advancing feet. Another giant was advancing out from the Forbidden Forest, roaring out its rage and readiness to kill. And it was coming straight for them.

"Run!" Harry hissed, grabbing at Draco's arm, only to find the blue flame still constraining them.

"Just wait," Draco said confidently, and waved his wand, making the fire thicken and thicken, a wider length of points on the circle so more ground was covered, magically failing to burn beneath it. The only thing to burn would be anyone fool enough to try and step through it who was Draco's enemy. Harry could have left the circle and crossed it if he wanted. Draco couldn't say the same for anyone else here with them at the forest.

The giant, for one. When the giant stepped onto the fire, he let out a bone-chilling scream and went up in blue flames, blackness consuming his entire body up to the very blue sky. Fire circled in ringlets around him, melting his long calves to nothing and starting on the massive knees. Harry grabbed onto Draco, seeming fearful of a terrible fall onto them or onto Hogwarts, but that was the beauty of Protego Diabolica. There would be nothing left to fall.

The giant immolated from what almost looked to be within, so deep the flames of blue were intermingling with its body turning to a corpse before their very eyes. "Draco!" Harry screamed, disbelieving, and Draco gave him a hard kiss on the cheek, to tell him, *Believe it,* as the giant set up a huge pillar of flame that shone high above Hogwarts and the Forbidden Forest, pure white light.

When the flames were through, the only thing left was the giant's club, bigger than several people, which fell like a bomb onto the nearby trees and sent their branches flying off. Draco inhaled sharply, not having been entirely sure himself it would work, but then, there it had.

"You *are* a dark lord," Harry said shakily, and Draco took his hand quizzically, to see if Harry had finally reached his breaking point when it came to Draco, and that was what those words

meant. But instead, Harry just kept firm hold of Draco's hand.

The Elder Wand

Chapter Notes

Hi all! Someone asked for descriptions of some of the characters. Here is the best I can give- Draco is tall with gray eyes and chin-length white-blond hair, Luna is pale with blue eyes and very long white-blonde hair, and Dante is also pale, with dark eyes, a doll-like face, and dark waist-length wavy hair he often wears in a braid. Hope that helps! <3

Fixed a mistake in chapter 22.

Hope everyone is enjoying! I'm loving all your comments! Have fun :)

Playlist

"Nagini!" Draco cried, spotting that mottled green scale pattern again through the flames. "Harry, it's right there! It's been watching us!" Almost as if Nagini wanted them to follow it...

They followed, despite the fact that the snake was deliberately luring them in. Nagini may well have been drawing them into a thicket full of giants, to Voldemort himself and his top lieutenants, or to a bomb of hellfire so strong it made Draco's Protego Diabolica look like child's play. And yet they followed, because Nagini was the last Horcrux now, and they had no choice but to go after it. Maybe if they hadn't been parted from Hermione, she would have been wise enough to tell them to do something different, but as it was, they went, only belatedly breaking off from holding hands to run faster.

They chased Nagini to a clearing in the forest, half-covered with fallen branches from the dropped giant's club. The trees were so thick around the clearing, only filtered daylight made it through into the area, a dimness like the sun had begun to set above them. Nagini stopped slithering away and faced them then and there, with no army behind it, no other threat there, and Draco realized it had lured them there to take care of them itself. Nagini was the army.

That had proved true at Godric's Hollow, when Nagini had surprised them and almost killed all four of them. There were only two of them now, but they were prepared. And they had the Sword of Gryffindor. Harry pocketed his wand and pulled out the sword from its sheath, holding it before him with two hands and a wondrously steady look to his green eyes behind his glasses. This was Harry Potter ready to kill.

Draco immediately shot out the spell that had proved the most effective on Nagini before, Dracosanguis, but it didn't hit. Faster than Draco could see, Nagini had struck forward and drove its fangs into Harry's arm, making Harry drop the sword right away.

"Harry!" Draco shrieked, and shot a Stunner at Nagini that impacted but failed to make any change in how Nagini was going for Harry, coiling his body around Harry's hurt arm and beginning to constrict. Harry screamed in agony, and Draco threw fireballs at Nagini to try and dislodge it, but to no effect. Dracosanguis he tried again, and Nagini made a hissing sound but did not disengage.

It only moved when Harry fumblingly picked up the sword with his free non-dominant arm, and slashed Nagini across the side. Nagini reared back, letting go of Harry. Harry tried to pick up the sword with both hands after dropping it, but it slipped from his grasp.

"Harry!" Draco cried again, and flung himself bodily between Nagini and Harry. Only both Draco and Harry shooting fireballs in Nagini's face kept the snake from striking at Draco the way it had at Harry.

Nagini was thrashing, clearly not liking the wound it had taken to the side. *We can kill it,* Draco realized, *If only we're strong enough- no, if only we're smart enough*, and that would be the last Horcrux, Voldemort already halfway there to gone...

"Dracosanguis!" Draco cast, and this time he could see the blood on Nagini's flank where Harry had caught it catch alight. Nagini hissed and writhed in pain, whipping its tail to try to put out the flame, and caught Draco with the end of its tail in its flailing. Draco went flying through the air for ten feet until he crashed into a tree and down to the forest floor.

"Draco!" he heard Harry call, but the world went away for a moment. The intelligence that he'd imagined them facing Nagini with was dead and gone, when he could barely see straight, getting himself up too far away from Harry and Nagini to help. But as he picked his winded self up and staggered towards the battle, he saw Harry with effort lifting the sword again despite his wounded right arm, slashing at Nagini with it, as much to keep him away as to hurt him...

Nagini's movements were no longer so sharp, so deathly defined either. The snake was staggered, thrashing out at Harry in similarly wounded, slow attempts- but *Draco* wasn't wounded, if he could only catch his breath...

"Dracosanguis! Dracosanguis! DRACOSANGUIS!"

Nagini writhed on the ground, fire spreading across its side and throughout its blood. "Now, Harry!" Draco yelled, and Harry raised the sword, blood streaming down both his arms- Draco couldn't tell whether from Nagini or Harry himself- with a glint to the bloody blade in the filtered sunlight. Harry brought down the sword upon Nagini-

And missed, sending blood spraying everywhere, as the blade impacted Nagini just below the neck. It didn't pierce through, but cut out a great red chunk of flesh from the beast. Nagini hissed louder and bucked and flailed, tail just barely missing Harry, who leaped over it.

"Finish it!" Draco yelled, soaked in blood now from head to toe- snake blood. "Finish it, Harry!"

And Harry lifted the Sword of Gryffindor and brought it down upon Nagini perfectly at last, blade slicing into the beast's neck, and severing the hissing head from its twisting body. In that moment, the final Horcrux died.

Or at least, what Draco thought to be the final Horcrux.

"YES!" Draco screamed, running over and flinging himself on Harry in a wild embrace, uncaring of the blood that covered both of them. "Harry, you did it! You killed Nagini!"

"We killed Nagini," Harry echoed, looking stunned and not entirely with Draco. He had dropped the sword and gone to clutch his wounded wand arm. It sent tentacles of fear through Draco where there had only been exultation. "That's good. Now there's- there's only Voldemort left."

"Harry, we need to get you medical attention before you can take on anyone else, let alone Voldemort!" Draco exclaimed, more alarmed than he could say by Harry's sluggish demeanor. It was only with an effort that Harry seemed to come back to himself, mastering his blood-drained form enough to say,

"No, Draco, I'm fine, I can fight."

Maybe Nagini had been more right than it seemed to draw them into a fight with it. The damage it had dealt Harry in close combat seemed overwhelming, too much for Harry to carry on even as he claimed he could. Draco feared Harry would pass out where he stood, and wished he knew any healing spells. He knew he needed to get Harry to someone who did. Severus flashed through his mind. Severus had been in the depths of combat, but he would have to do...

"Come on, we need to get you some help," Draco said, supporting Harry by the shoulders as he hauled him up. "Do you still have the invisibility cloak on you?"

Harry produced it from within his robes, miraculously almost unstained by all the blood that had gotten everywhere, and let Draco drape the cloak over both of them. "There's- no need," Harry tried to say, voice cloudy, almost foggy, and Draco's heart rebelled in his chest.

"Just do as you're told, Harry," Draco said roughly, pressing a kiss to Harry's forehead under the invisibility cloak before picking himself up and leading their way back towards the castle.

They made it past the Dementors, past the spiders, past the still-warring giants that lived. They made it all the way past the entrance hall and into the Great Hall where the Order should have been holding the strongest, and there was the sight that Draco had most been dreading: the pale snake-like head and red eyes of Voldemort.

Those eyes lit out from a frame all wrapped in black, none the worse from the Naufragiam now after a year dwelling in his enforced homeplace. Voldemort had emerged from the shadows before he ever had in the blue loop- perhaps because the battle was not going so to

his liking this time around- and was forcing his way into the Great Hall with wand in hand, waving aside members of the Order like flies with whipping motions of his wand arm.

"Who dares?" Voldemort called shrilly. "Who dares face Lord Voldemort?"

Draco grabbed onto Harry underneath the cloak, holding his bleeding boyfriend closer to him, and said nothing, plastering them to one of the walls near a fireplace. No one said a thing, combat come to a halt in the Great Hall and in what Draco could see of the the entrance hall. Voldemort's arrival had brought the whole battlefield to a standstill, as if all of the progress the Order had made could be wiped away in an instant by the mere appearance of the other side's leader: the one and only noseless wonder, snake-face himself, out on the town and ready for a party.

"I said," Voldemort called out, sending Lavender Brown's unconscious body flying with a flick of his wrist, "Who dares face Lord Voldemort?"

And then a slight figure had picked himself up from behind a pile of unconscious bodies and fallen spiders, one that stood out for wearing not black like so many on both sides, but a beautiful and iridescent silver.

"I challenge you," said Dantanian Noir, and stepped out in front of Voldemort.

Voldemort hesitated, perhaps from the unusual appearance of Dante, or perhaps just his lack of recognition of his new foe. "Who are you?" he hissed, and Dante tossed his head, his long black braid whipping behind his shoulder.

"Your challenger," Dante said coldly. "Do you accept, Lord Voldemort?"

"I accept," Voldemort agreed, though his eyes still ranged over Dante in pure fascination as they stepped further away from each other in some parody of a formal duel. It was a wonder neither of them bowed- and then Dante did, his insultingly over-elaborate one, and it seemed a terrible risk to get Voldemort mad. But then, it was a terrible risk to have stepped forward at all.

If not perhaps in Dante's mind. He'd once told Draco, after all, that he thought he was stronger than Voldemort. It was time to see him put his money where his mouth was.

Voldemort began, as Draco had somehow known he would. Dante had waited to figure out Harry as well when dueling him.

Voldemort did not shoot out the green light of death as Draco had expected, though. Perhaps he was simply too curious about this unknown variable that had entered itself into his reckoning. Instead, he shot forward a series of massive hissing snakes from his wand, faster than the naked eye could detect.

Dante was ready for them. "Dracosanguis," he hissed, and with a single wave of the Elder Wand, the snakes shot up off the floor smoking and dead, fire leaking out from them to cover the stone. Dante reached with his empty hand to send the fire spiraling up towards the roof in

a naked show of power, but Voldemort wasn't looking at the flames. He was looking at Dante's hand.

"The Elder Wand," Voldemort breathed, sounding that rarest of things for him- surprised. "Did you kill Bellatrix Lestrange for it?"

Dante retaliated with a burst forward of the flames, soaring towards Voldemort at breakneck pace. Voldemort conjured a large silver shield out of the air, slitted eyes staring forward at Dante in breathless captivation. "Who are you, and why do you have the Elder Wand?"

There was no sign of fear from Voldemort, dueling against the wand that supposedly made its wielder invincible. Instead, it was only excitement, an enthusiasm he hadn't shown when throwing aside members of the Order like training dummies.

Dante leapt on top of the Ravenclaw table, advancing towards Voldemort with fire forming in ropes of either hand. He slashed out at Voldemort's silver shield with his fire ropes, fearless as anything Draco had ever seen.

Voldemort was ready for him. The shield broke, but an invisible shield behind it held back the fire. With a wave of Voldemort's arms, the fire changed and became a serpent that resembled Nagini. The serpent dove forward through the air, hissing at Dante, but Dante's pyromancy held. The snake trembled in the air, just inches from sinking its fangs into Dante, but it could not break Dante's control of fire, the pyromancy that had killed a hospital full of people on the day of his birth...

Voldemort let out a breath at the sight of the serpent lost from his control, rearing around to strike at him instead. He hissed at it and it evaporated in the air, becoming nothing but black smoke, and then he had to jump backwards as Dante returned with jets of fire now, too fast to change into anything, hammering into Voldemort's shields like Muggle bullets.

"Who are you," Voldemort shouted, "And why do you fight for Harry Potter?"

Dante screamed and the darts of fire became a great wave that crashed down upon Voldemort. Voldemort's shield held mostly, but flames from the side snaked over his face and burned its side, the rubbery white flesh bubbling and turning discolored. Voldemort scarcely seemed to notice it, so deep was his fascination. He retaliated with a blast of Confringo that broke the Ravenclaw table in half and sent Dante flying amongst broken pieces of timber, such was the power of it. Had Dante been closer to the blast, it could well have torn him apart.

Dante landed on the floor of the hall on his feet, hair coming out of his braid at either side making him look disheveled, though his composure seemed unbroken. He was breathing slightly hard, just a bit. Voldemort was advancing closer to Dante like a moth to a flame, and lashed out with a fire rope of his own.

Dante caught the fire rope with fire rope, Flagello catching in the air. The two fire whips smashed down over Hufflepuff table, sending more wood flying every way. The whips intertwined and tugged on one another in a deadly dance. Dante had his free hand out, trying to manipulate Voldemort's rope with pyromancy while he worked his own with his wand

hand, but the effort seemed too much for him, and he abandoned it. He put both hands behind his wand and thrashed the ropes up so high that Voldemort holding onto the other end of them soared.

Voldemort let out a howl of anger and slashed them down enough to send Dante flying into the staff table at the front of the Great Hall. Dante's body broke through from the impact and splintered the wood, so Dante set the staff table afire and threw it in Voldemort's face with his free hand while their fire ropes did battle. Voldemort laughed, slashing the flying fire with his whip, and smashed it down again in a hit that vibrated the whole hall.

Screams sounded from the onlookers as torches and candelabras tumbled down from their places in the hall and onto the wounded. Voldemort had leapt upon the Gryffindor table to pursue Dante, so Dante discarded his fire whip and set the whole table a burning blue alight. Voldemort leapt off again, falling on one leg as he did, a rare sign of weakness as he had to stumble to his feet. Dante was merciless, fighting as he had the whole time with fire alone, sending a firestorm down upon Voldemort that Voldemort's shield reflected back upon the hall.

Death Eaters and the Order alike fled the Great Hall in a mass, imperiled by the wild fire. Draco called up a shield of his own and kept Harry with him where he was, afraid moving would lose them the invisibility cloak and the Dark Lord would turn his fury onto Harry.

Dante's fire was beautiful, in a way, even if it wasn't enough.

Voldemort advanced up the steps to what had once been the staff table under the cover of his shield like the eye of a flaming hurricane, an oval of free space where his malevolent red eyes gleamed at Dante like the most lovely thing he had ever seen. Dante cried out at Voldemort's closeness, breaking off the wave of flame to shoot Baubillious at his pursuer, but it struck between them rather than at Voldemort.

The stage where the staff table used to sit split apart under the force. Dante screamed and twisted his ankle beneath him as he fell, dark hair completely out of its bindings now, falling like a curtain over his face as he rolled down over the floor again.

"Expelliarmus!" Voldemort shouted, and the Elder Wand broke loose of Dante's two linked hands and flew into Voldemort's waiting grasp. Draco silenced a harsh in-drawn breath of his own, already sensing the end for Dante had come-

And perhaps it would have, if Voldemort had known there was still anyone inside the Great Hall watching them. As it was, he seemed to have other intentions for his felled prey.

"Beautiful," Voldemort declared with a bone-chilling hiss, "Beautiful beyond compare," and knelt down before Dante, Elder Wand sliding down onto Dante's forehead and over his pale cheek. "Beautiful fierce one, you shall be mine," he said, and leaned forward and pressed his half-burned lips to Dante's.

"EXPULSO!" screamed Dante, and sent Voldemort flying with another wand from his pocket. It was Yaxley's wand, as it happened, or perhaps it was Umbridge's, or another poor soul's- Draco had no idea and it hardly mattered. All that it meant was that Dante had gotten

Voldemort off him. He did and then some, the vehemence of the spell sending the monster who had been kissing him flying all the way backwards across the hall.

Dante spat out on the floor, while Voldemort impacted the back wall in a flash of blue light.

Draco heard Harry whisper, "Should we help Dante? Is now the chance?"

But Voldemort made no move to close the distance between himself and Dante again. With Dante knelt on the ground panting for breath like his lungs would burst, Voldemort picked himself up off the ground with the Elder Wand still in his hand.

"Thank you," Voldemort said, voice ringing out through the empty burning hall. "Thank you, beautiful. Thank you for this wand. I will kill Harry Potter with this wand and deliver his corpse to you. Only tell me your name."

"Dante!"

Dante began to retch onto the floor as Voldemort swept his long dark cloak behind him and departed the Great Hall.

When it was clear Voldemort had gone, Draco tore out from underneath the invisibility cloak and ran over to Dante. "Dante! Dante, are you alright?"

Dante lifted his face, paler than Draco had ever seen him with disgust, and perhaps with fear. "No. Did you see? He took the Elder Wand from me."

The Chosen One

Chapter Notes

Fixed a mistake in chapter 22 with the Elder Wand.

Enjoy! Much love! <3

Playlist

Voldemort's shrill voice sounded again in Draco's ears, so close Draco flung himself away from Dante, towards Harry under the cloak to protect him. But Voldemort had not reentered the wreckage of the hall. It echoed over the ruins, and Draco understood. Voldemort was amplifying his voice so everyone could hear it, his followers and his enemies.

"You have fought valiantly. Lord Voldemort knows how to value bravery."

"I thought that was a Gryffindor trait," Harry said shakily, picking himself up and emerging from under the cloak to come to Draco's side. Draco let Harry lean on his side as Voldemort kept speaking, and Dante retched emptily again on the stone.

"You have sent your best against me. He has lost. I have spared his life, for his bravery. I will spare no others. If you continue to resist me, you will all die, one by one. I do not wish this to happen. Every drop of magical blood spilled is a loss and a waste.

"Lord Voldemort is merciful. I command my forces to retreat, immediately.

"You have one hour. Dispose of your dead with dignity. Treat your injured.

"I speak now, Harry Potter, directly to you. You have permitted your friends to fight for you rather than face me yourself. I shall wait for one hour in the Forbidden Forest. If, at the end of that hour, you have not come to me, have not given yourself up, then battle recommences. I shall find you, Harry Potter, and I shall punish every last man, woman and child who has tried to conceal you from me. One hour."

"Harry," Draco said, catching his breath, "Don't listen to him. He's only saying this because they're losing."

"They're not losing, though," Dante said grimly, joining the two of them with a limp to his twisted ankle. "Not with him on their side. I'm sorry, he was too strong. He will be too strong for all of us. He will tear us apart. But he will not take me alive."

"Dante, don't talk like that," Draco said, remembering the sight of Voldemort's body dead and cold in the blue loop. "Harry will kill him. I swear Harry will kill him."

"Harry?" Dante said with a sharp laugh. "Harry can barely stand."

The Order took refuge in the entrance hall, while the Death Eaters seemed to have retreated to the Forbidden Forest with Voldemort and all of their dark creatures. Fire from the Great Hall had leaked out to the entrance hall, but only enough to char some of the decorations and foremost stones. It was still inhabitable, and so the Order had filled it with their wounded and dead.

Draco knew Harry had only an hour to make his decision, but he couldn't help sprinting to see the faces of the dead. He searched them for Remus, for Sirius, for Tonks, for Fred, but nothing. No Weasleys included anywhere. He heaved a guilty sigh of relief as he went over to the injured being treated by Madam Pomfrey, only to jump forward when he saw Hermione amongst the wounded.

"Hermione! What happened to you?" Draco exclaimed.

"That explosion! It took me right out of the fighting. Luna and Ron protected me while I was unconscious. Apparently Pius Thicknesse tried to kill me, but they held him back."

"Oh, yes, we met the Minister of Magic, it was very exciting," Luna said, without the usual pep in her voice.

Draco hugged her as tightly as he could, getting blood all over her. Both she and Ron were scalded by the explosion, burn marks on their faces and hands from smoke, but that wasn't keeping Ron from holding hands with a similarly scalded Hermione as they waited for Madam Pomfrey to get to her. Harry and Draco both hugged Hermione too.

Right now Madam Pomfrey and her helpers were seeing to the centaur Firenze, dealing with a bleeding wound that looked like it might take some time.

"Severus?" Draco called loudly. "Severus, are you here?" When he didn't get an immediate response, fear seized his heart, but soon Severus emerged from a knot of furiously whispering Order members. "Severus, Harry's hurt. He was bit in the arm by Nagini. We killed Nagini, though. We killed it, and a giant..."

"Come with me, both of you," Severus ordered tersely, "Without delay," and Harry and Draco were forced to wave their swift goodbyes to Ron, Hermione, and Luna as Severus hurried them away. As they crossed the entrance hall towards the marble staircase, Draco could feel what felt like countless eyes upon them, or rather upon Harry, after the announcement Voldemort had made. Draco wondered how many of them were hoping Harry would turn himself over as commanded so this could end.

Sirius and Remus caught up to them just at the foot of the staircase. "Harry! Draco! What's happened? What's all that blood over the two of you? Come, we have to get you medical attention..."

"I'll see to them," Severus said stonily, and Remus and Sirius exchanged glances, shocked by Severus's obstinacy at a time like this.

"Severus, what are you doing? Where are you taking them?" Remus asked worriedly. "It's not too long until the battle will resume..."

It seemed Remus and Sirius had already assumed which way Harry's decision would go. But Severus leveled his most impenetrable stare at them, and intoned, "They must come with me, now. Dumbledore's business."

Remus and Sirius drew back as if slapped by those two magical words. "Dumbledore's- Severus, is there something Dumbledore told you that he didn't tell the rest of us?" Sirius blurted, and Remus lay a hand on Sirius's.

"Go on, then," Remus said softly. "Take care of Dumbledore's business."

Severus took the two of them not to the headmaster's office, as one might expect for Dumbledore's business, but to a set of chambers Draco didn't recognize on the third floor. "These were the Defense Against the Dark Arts rooms," Severus said curtly, "When I was Defense professor. My things were all left here during the invasion of Hogwarts. We shall see how many remained under the new master of Defense."

What Severus had been searching for materialized almost immediately, to Severus's relief and Harry and Draco's confusion. The room was dark and nondescript, but there was a Pensieve there: the Pensieve Draco had used so many times with Severus in his chambers, smaller than the one in Dumbledore's office but no less a Pensieve. Severus immediately drew a vial from his pocket, then drew his wand and pressed it to his head, purple liquid leaking out to make a memory.

"You have something to show us, Severus?" Draco said warily. "Something Dumbledore said?"

"Yes," said Severus. "Yes, I do."

Harry immediately walked forward to the rim of the Pensieve, gripping it and staring down into its empty contents waiting for the memory. But Severus took Harry by the shoulders and pushed him back impatiently. "Not you. Draco first. I will see to your injuries, Potter, while Draco watches the memory."

Draco and Harry obliged. There was little else to do. They did it quickly, with the clock ticking down. Draco took a last look at Severus examining Harry's arm, before stepping forward and emptying the vial from Severus into the basin of the Pensieve. Then Draco plunged his head inside it.

Draco was inside Dumbledore's office sometime at night, with Fawkes's eyes seeming to pierce straight through him, despite the bird obviously having no idea he was there. The bird's only companions were Severus, sitting down, and Dumbledore, pacing the floor. It seemed Dumbledore was about to make a disclosure, one that Severus had wanted Draco and Harry to hear from Dumbledore's mouth himself.

"You have unveiled your true loyalties to the Death Eaters at Nurmengard," Dumbledore began. "You will no longer be able to play your role as a spy." Severus hung his head, looking ashamed and angry at the failure, but there was amusement in Dumbledore's voice. "Much to the gratification of your fascinating godson, to be sure. He has been against your double agent role for some time. And indeed, perhaps there are advantages to having you firmly on our side. You will be able to protect Harry with more ease, perhaps, without a mask to wear."

"Protecting Harry," Severus said grimly, "Is my only priority," and Draco felt his own eyes open wide in astonishment.

"Oh, I hardly believe that is true any longer, Severus," Dumbledore said kindly. "Perhaps it was, some time ago, but you have other connections now, deny them as you might. Still, I will ask you to remain by Harry Potter's side, and protect him as well as you can." Severus nodded tersely, a certain hatred in his eyes as he peered at Dumbledore, but it was well-veiled. "And when the time comes, Severus, I will ask you to tell Harry Potter something I have never told anyone, not even yourself until now."

"When the time comes," Severus said coldly. "When is that?"

"Harry must not know this, not until the last moment, not until it is necessary, otherwise how could he have the strength to do what must be done?"

Draco's heart immediately sank at the sound of Dumbledore's words. This was the side of Dumbledore he had always hated, the side that Aberforth had warned him of, keeping secrets from people and saying it was for their own good. What could he possibly have kept from Harry this long, and Severus kept as well until this very moment, words Severus did not even dare speak?

"But what must he do?"

"That is between Harry and me. Now, listen closely, Severus. There will come a time- after my death- do not argue, do not interrupt! There will come a time when Lord Voldemort will seem to fear for the life of his snake. Or a time when the snake has been killed, by the hands of Harry and his friends."

"Nagini?" Severus asked in astonishment.

"Precisely. If there comes a time when Lord Voldemort has lost his snake, then, I think, it will be safe to tell Harry."

"Tell him what?"

Dumbledore prepared himself with a great effort, then let the proverbial sword fall.

"Tell him that on the night Lord Voldemort tried to kill him, when Lily cast her own life between them as a shield, the Killing Curse rebounded upon Lord Voldemort, and a fragment of Voldemort's soul was blasted apart from the whole, and latched itself on to the only living soul left in that collapsing building. Part of Lord Voldemort lives inside Harry, and it is that which gives him the power of speech with snakes, and a connection with Lord Voldemort's mind that he has never understood. And while that fragment of soul, unmissed by Voldemort, remains attached to, and protected by Harry, Lord Voldemort cannot die."

Draco knew what that meant, even if Severus didn't. They hadn't killed the final Horcrux, with Nagini.

Harry was the final Horcrux.

"So the boy... the boy must die?" Severus asked with admirable evenness, under the circumstances.

"And Voldemort himself must do it, Severus. That is essential." Dumbledore walked over to his desk and picked up the Sword of Gryffindor, whose rubies glittered sinisterly in the half-light. "But if Harry cannot be driven to sacrifice himself of his own accord- and I do believe if he understands, he will make the right choice, but if he does not- then we will need a stronger voice than yours to convince him."

Severus stared at Dumbledore blankly, then let out a sardonic laugh. Fawkes's wings fluttered at the sound, threatening to take flight. "No. No, Dumbledore, not even you could possibly be so cruel."

"He will listen," Dumbledore said firmly, "To Draco Black, when the time comes. If any voice can drive him to death, as it does to life, it is the voice of the one he most loves. Draco must be there, to ensure Harry does what needs to be done."

"I cannot ask that of Draco," Severus said in horror, and Dumbledore simply told him, laying the sword back down,

"You must."

"I thought... all these years... that we were protecting Harry for her. For Lily."

"We have protected him because it has been essential to teach him, to raise him, to let him try his strength," Dumbledore went on. "Meanwhile, the connection between them grows ever stronger, a parasitic growth: sometimes I have thought he suspects it himself. If I know him, he will have arranged matters so that when he does set out to meet his death, it will, truly, mean the end of Voldemort."

Dumbledore opened his eyes, and Severus looked both bitter and remorseful for his own part. "You have kept him alive so that he can die at the right moment?"

"Don't be shocked, Severus. How many men and women have you watched die?"

"Lately, only those whom I could not save," Severus said slowly. "I have risked everything to protect Harry, to protect my godson. And now you tell me you have let the two of them come together just so my godson can drive Harry to death. No. I cannot do this to them. I cannot. For Lily's sake, I cannot-"

Dumbledore looked straight at Severus for some time, crystal clarity never leaving his blue eyes behind his spectacles. "I believe, Severus, that when the time comes, you will do what needs to be done. As must we all."

Draco lifted his head from the Pensieve speechless, barely seeing before him, until Severus spoke his name. "Draco, step back from the Pensieve. I have healed Harry's wounds. Now he must see the memory."

"No," Draco said instinctively, knowing how Harry felt about Dumbledore, knowing how it would break Harry to know what Dumbledore had been preparing for him. "No, he shouldn't."

Severus reached forward and plucked Draco out of the way without blinking an eye. "Go on, Potter."

Harry stepped forward with a nervous look at Draco, sleeve ripped away with the fang marks in his arm gone, and gave a small smile before he lowered his head into the Pensieve.

"No," Draco half-cried out, half-sobbed, and Severus drew him away bodily with a sigh of impatience.

"Look at me, Draco," Severus said, and Draco shook his head.

"No, you bastard, how could you hide this from me- from him-"

"It is as Dumbledore said," Severus intoned, no longer so guilty as he had seemed in the memory, only insistent on what had to be. "He would not have had the strength to do what needed to be done. Nor, I fear, would have you."

"What has to be done," Draco echoed bleakly, and Severus nodded.

"You told me you slayed the beast Nagini," Severus said. "Is that not the truth?"

"Yes, it's the truth."

"Then the time has come," Severus said with a distant look in his eyes, "And you have your role too you must play, my godson."

It all came to Draco then with terrible clarity. "Dumbledore told me that in the war, in time, I would have a heavy task. More than I could bear. This is what he meant?" Severus nodded. "And when he gave me the Sword of Gryffindor, he said it was a reminder of- chats we'd had in his office, that-"

Severus eased the bloodied sword out of the scabbard on Harry's belt and handed it by the hilt to Draco. Draco took it, numbed by the feel of it, now that he knew what it was for. "That's why he left me the Sword of Gryffindor. To use to threaten- to kill Harry, if necessary."

"Voldemort must be the one to kill Potter," Severus reminded him, as if Draco had actually been considering it.

"Yes, I heard that part!" Draco yelled angrily, whirling on Severus. "How could you not have told us? All this time? How could you expect me to-"

"We all had our secrets we kept for Dumbledore," Severus said quietly, and it was true.

Draco remembered Harry asking him one night about him coming back from the dead. Hope careened through Draco, but bare and tenuous. If there was a part where Harry wouldn't die after all, like in the blue loop- something Dumbledore hadn't told Severus, or something even Dumbledore hadn't known-

But how could Draco stake Harry's life on the hope that Harry could somehow come back to life after Voldemort killed him?

What other way was there to kill Voldemort, though, if Dumbledore was right about what Harry was- other than the death of all the Horcruxes- Harry had committed to the destruction of every Horcrux, each and every one-

Harry lifted his head from the Pensieve. Draco and Severus both whirled to face him, as guilty as sinners facing a saint. Harry's eyes went down from his own hip to Draco's hand, to where the Sword of Gryffindor dangled from Draco's grasp.

"There's no need for that, Draco," Harry said, with unnatural calm and sweetness. "There's no need to convince me, or force me to it. I'll do it."

The Sword of Gryffindor dropped from Draco's hand, banging over the floor of the Defense teacher's chambers, an uncertain clanging before it stilled.

"Potter," Severus said, lifting his face with the weight of a thousand years on him, and yet he spoke steadily and without doubt. "You understand it, the final task Dumbledore has left for you?"

"Yes," Harry said, closing his eyes, "Yes, I do," then had run over and flung himself onto Draco. "It's okay, dragon, don't cry, please don't cry, I won't be able to do it if you cry..."

Draco hadn't realized he was crying until Harry told him he was. "You won't die," he said softly to Harry, "Not really," clinging to his memory from the blue loop for hope, and Harry took it for what it was: a last desperate bargaining plea, with the wheel of fate about to come down upon them all.

"I won't die," Harry whispered in agreement, and stepped away from him. He looked unspeakably courageous then, still bloodied and battered, his glasses Draco had just fixed for him right in place, before green eyes that no one who ever saw could surely ever forget. "So

I'm to go to the forest, then, as Voldemort said, and let him kill me?" he asked Severus with full clarity in his face and voice, and no one could have ever been braver than in that moment.

"Yes," Severus said, not without a look of pride on his face. "Yes, Mr. Potter, you are."

"Then this is goodbye," Harry said, and walked over and pressed a kiss to Draco's cheek before putting on the invisibility cloak, and leaving the room. He was heading down to the forest now.

"Draco, stop crying," Severus ordered brusquely, and that was it. Draco dissolved into tears, frustrated, disbelieving tears at how quickly he had let Harry go, perhaps forever, and this wasn't how this was supposed to go- except perhaps it was, perhaps this was exactly how it all had been last time, before Severus died, and perhaps Harry would rise again like he had once before in the blue loop before Draco's shocked eyes-

"He can't die," Draco whimpered, and Severus took him in his arms, letting Draco sob the word against his cloak. "He can't. None of this means anything if he dies."

Severus was too honest to say he believed Harry would not die. All he said to his godson was, "Ssh. Ssh, now, Draco. Ssh."

After that there was only waiting. Draco managed to stop crying after some time, upon which Severus extricated himself from Draco as if comforting him had never happened, and together they made their way down to the entrance hall, which Harry had long since passed in his invisibility cloak on his way to his...

Death, yes- but Draco could barely bring himself to think it. Something had to happen to bring Harry back again this time too, it had to. He wouldn't allow himself to consider any alternative other than Harry returning to him at the end of this war. That was what they always promised, after all, 'until the end of the war.' Harry couldn't drop out before they reached the conclusion.

Draco went to sit with Ron, Hermione, and Luna, all newly-treated and ready to fight again, but they were full of questions about where Harry was. So were Sirius and Remus, who came over to them to ask and to fuss over Draco in his bloody robes. Dante kept aloof, at least, sitting by himself at the far end of the hall, and no one, not even a Weasley, seemed dare approach him.

Draco was still half-heartedly dodging questions about Harry's whereabouts when he suddenly felt a voice at the back of his ear, the serpentine high hiss of Voldemort amplified to the whole school again. Draco's heart sank to his stomach, because he knew what this had to mean.

And so it did. "Harry Potter is dead," Voldemort spoke the words, and others around Draco cried out, but not Draco. He just leaned his head on Hermione's shoulder, burying his face in her bushy hair.

"He was killed as he ran away," Voldemort went on with a lie, "Trying to save himself while you lay down your lives for him. We bring you his body as proof that your hero is gone.

"The battle is won. I have beaten your champion. The Boy Who Lived is finished. There must be no more war. Anyone who continues to resist, man, woman or child, will be slaughtered, as will every member of their family. Come out of the castle, now, kneel before me, and you shall be spared. Your parents and children, your brothers and sisters will live, and be forgiven, and you will join me in the new world we shall build together."

Silence greeted the announcement, pure stricken silence from all of the Order and the students who had joined them. After a minute, flurried whispers broke out. No one seemed to know what to believe. Sirius and Remus, who had already been pestering Draco for information, turned to him with their honest brown eyes huge, full of fear for one of their adopted sons. "Draco, is this true? Did Harry go to Voldemort-"

Draco closed his eyes hard, knowing there would be no vocalizing his hopes of Harry's survival until he saw it with his own eyes. "He didn't run."

"So he's dead?" Remus asked, and Sirius let out a wracking dry sob. Remus wrapped his arms around Sirius from behind, instinctively comforting the man he loved, and Draco nodded as if in a dream.

"Yes, I do think he's dead," Draco said, with the surreal calmness of Luna in his voice, while Luna clung onto him and began to cry. "But he went to face Voldemort himself, as Voldemort demanded. He sacrificed himself for us. He didn't run. He never would have run."

The Order of the Phoenix gathered at the front doors of Hogwarts, waiting for what Voldemort had promised: to see if their savior was really dead as Voldemort had claimed. Many were already crying or close to it, exhausted from the battle, as sunset began to present itself upon Hogwarts.

Up the broken steps came Voldemort and his Death Eaters, with one figure hulking above the rest: Hagrid. Déjà vu crashed upon Draco from his memories of the blue loop, the memories that came to mind when Dementors were near and he was undefended, the sight of Harry Potter dead in Hagrid's arms- and so it was. Harry lay pale and motionless in the massive arms of Hagrid, unmoving and for all the world like he was a corpse Voldemort had vanquished.

"NO!" Professor McGonagall screamed, a sound of ultimate shock and horror from the most composed person Draco knew. Her voice echoed through the air in horrified lament, and those joining her were silent under its force. The Order of the Phoenix emerged out onto the steps, person by person, to cast their eyes upon Harry's dead body, which wasn't really dead, it couldn't be-

"No!"

"No!"

Ron and Hermione's voices sounded out into the air, along with Luna's softer voice saying, "It can't be."

Draco could see Vince, Greg, and Pansy amongst the crowd of Death Eaters. He forced himself to face them, to look them in the eye, to show them he still believed he had chose the right side. When they noticed him, not one of them would keep his gaze, despite being the supposed victors.

Then the Order as they all came out to face Voldemort began to yell and scream, cries of heartbreak against the walking death before them, cries of the kind of defiance Harry Potter had shown in life. *None of them believe he tried to flee,* Draco realized suddenly. *They all know that if he died, he died for them.*

Draco was silent, as was Dante, at the far end of the crowd from him. Their gazes met. Dante inclined his head towards Draco, as if in some oblique acknowledgment of Draco's grief.

"SILENCE!" Voldemort yelled, and cast a silencing spell upon them all, one of his awe-inspiring strength. "It is over! Set him down, Hagrid, at my feet, where he belongs!"

Hagrid obeyed, tears running down his ruddy face, and Draco's heart ached for him too. But Hagrid would soon be smiling again, because Harry was going to get up and defeat Voldemort for them, he had to be going to get up...

"You see?" Voldemort crowed, as if the sight of his brutality proved anything other than his own monstrousness. "Harry Potter is dead! Do you understand now, deluded ones? He was nothing, ever, but a boy who relied on others to sacrifice themselves for him!"

"No, that's you!" Ron yelled, rather nonsensically but full of that excellent defiance, and the silencing spell didn't seem to work anymore for a moment, a chorus of angry voices joining Ron's before Voldemort cast another explosive spell to silence them.

"He was killed while trying to sneak out of the castle grounds," Voldemort gloated, telling the lie no one, not even his own followers, believed. "Killed while trying to save himself-"

Sirius broke free from Remus and rushed at Voldemort. Voldemort disarmed him with ease, a red light surging through the air before all the dozens of people watching. Sirius fell to the ground, defeated in his haste to retaliate against Voldemort's words, and Draco held his breath. He didn't know if Harry was alive, but Sirius could die, right here and now-

Voldemort held onto Sirius's distinctive glyph-laden wand, turning it in his hand before tossing it aside dismissively. "I know who you are," he hissed. "Sirius Black. Believed the betrayer of James and Lily Potter, for so long. But always my enemy. And here you are, on your knees for me, where fate has always meant for you to be."

"Not on my knees," Sirius grunted, picking himself up to his feet with difficulty, and facing Voldemort right in the eye, man to man, the consummate Gryffindor, somehow unafraid. "Never on my knees. Not for the likes of you."

"A passing resemblance you bear your cousin..." Voldemort mused to himself, before raising his voice for the whole assembly to hear. "Sirius Black, of House Black. The noblest and oldest of our hallowed blood, and you choose to fight against your own interests. Your own history. What madness, in a man whose bravery and pure blood would have made him one of my foremost lieutenants."

"Not interested in replacing Bella, thanks," Sirius said loudly, voice full of overt disgust, and Voldemort laughed scornfully at Sirius's cheek, as if Sirius was truly the mad one for continuing to show himself against him.

"And yet it is not too late for you, Sirius Black," Voldemort said silkily. "You might yet prove yourself as one of us, and ascend to your rightful place at my side. Only one act stands in your way of that ascension."

Voldemort lifted a spindly white finger and pointed it at where Sirius had ripped free of the crowd, where Remus stood motionless, mortally terrified for his husband. "Slay the abomination you call your lover!" The Death Eaters burst into laughter, an eerie sound when there had been so little of a joke. "Slay Remus Lupin, here and now, and I shall embrace you and call you my own."

Sirius's voice carried clear for every man, woman, and child to hear, the ultimate response to Voldemort whether Harry lived or, as Sirius doubtless thought, had died.

"Shut your filthy mouth, you ugly motherfucker!"

The silencing spell seemed to break again as cheers reverberated from Draco's side. Voldemort furiously gestured with his wand until they were silenced again with the loudest explosion, and Draco remembered this. He remembered how no matter what Voldemort did, he could not keep his detractors fully silenced.

"Very well," Voldemort said smoothly, as if all was just as he had expected from that little exercise in futility. "Petrificus totalus. If that is your choice, Black, then you will die like the dog I am told you are. Black here is now going to demonstrate what happens to anyone foolish enough to-"

And then the body bind on Sirius had broken, and he had hauled up and punched Voldemort in the jaw.

Voldemort staggered back, eyes going even redder with rage, but then they turned to what was also happening at the same time, while Sirius dove for his discarded wand and claimed it.

A roar had come up from far away, a roar of human voices going to war except it was not the Order of the Phoenix, it was someone else. The sound grabbed at Voldemort while Remus and Sirius made for each other. "Sirius!" Remus screamed, but he couldn't be heard over the sudden tumult. Remus catapulted himself past several of their friends and raced forward to Sirius's side, uncaring of Voldemort's proximity, and gripped onto Sirius's hand.

"HAGGER!" yelled Grawp, storming towards them, and Draco almost quaked before he remembered this was the giant on their side. More giants were coming for Grawp, Voldemort's giants, attacking him in mass, and now Draco could be afraid for Grawp.

Except behind Grawp came a horde of centaurs, unsuspected, undreamed-of, shooting their bows towards the Death Eaters and making them scatter. An arrow hit between Voldemort and Sirius, making Voldemort's gaze go towards the centaurs in incomprehension, and in that instant, Harry Potter disappeared.

"Harry!" Draco screamed, voice ripping from him at last, and knew where Harry was when Voldemort sent red light flying towards Remus and Sirius and there was a shield there for them, faster than either could have conjured it. "Harry, where are you?" Draco called, except perhaps he shouldn't be, so Harry's position under the cloak wouldn't be given away.

Harry was alive. Draco had known it, and it was true. Now was not the time to mope after him any longer. Now was the time to fight.

Draco had to run inside like everyone else did from the fighting giants. He could see the tides were turning in Grawp's favor, though, as Thestrals and Hippogriffs assaulted them from the sky. He knew someone who could deal a death blow to the giants, though, and he ran through the crowd in search of that flashing long black braid of Dante, calling out Dante's name now.

Draco saw Voldemort first, backing into the remains of the Great Hall which no longer burned, his faithful Death Eaters going with him visibly fearful as they ran. The Death Eaters were definitely outnumbered now as reinforcements arrived, led by the foremost of the non-Xaphan professors, Horace Slughorn. With him were residents and relations of Hogsmeade village, and what looked like ordinary wizarding folk ready to fight for the cause of light. Many fell under the curses and jinxes of the line of Death Eaters that set themselves at the front of the Great Hall, but some seemed to break through-

The line of Death Eaters held, until a wave of fire was unleashed upon them. It was so vast and so hot, nearly singing Draco as it passed him by, Draco actually thought Dante had become a dragon to breathe it down. But it was just Dante as a human, limping but pursuing them into the Great Hall, breaking their ranks with his pyromancy as the hall came alive again with his fire magic. Draco charged after him, energized by the sight of Voldemort retreating, and wondered if Voldemort regretted letting Dante live now.

The Order followed into the hall, individual duels pouring over into the broken spaces. Flitwick and McGonagall felled a group of masked Death Eaters, while Sirius and Remus flew past, pursuing Augustus Rookwood, who was screaming for Voldemort's aid that wasn't coming.

Draco watched them fell him with Stunners and turn onto their next victims, Travers and Selwyn, who launched themselves at Sirius and Remus with bloodthirsty passion. "That one!" Selwyn was yelling. "Sirius Black! He's the one who dared touch our lord! End him!"

Green light shot out from Selwyn's wand and Draco threw a piece of wood from one of the broken house tables in the way, blocking the shot. "Draco!" Remus yelled, "Behind you," and Draco whirled just in time to throw up his shield against an onrushing Macnair, who was

shooting fireballs like he thought he was Dante, smaller puffs of light and heat that Draco could block easily once he knew they were coming...

Screams broke out anew in the Great Hall, with a Death Eater who had been about to plunge his dagger into the side of Ron falling to his knees with what looked a mortal wound- the house elves were coming, the house elves of Xaphan, led by Dobby at front wearing Draco's discarded shirt from when he was eleven and Lucius Malfoy freed him.

"Fight for the fallen!" Dobby was urging on his fellow elves, who had armed themselves with pitchforks and kitchen knives and everything they had. They made an adorably monstrous conclave with the bloodthirst on their faces, as for the first time in Dobby's life, a whole room full of house elves was listening to Dobby.

"Fight for the fallen! Fight for Wooky and Nissy!"

Draco saw Death Eaters fleeing everywhere, from the elves, from the resolute members of the Order hunting them down with Stunners and worse, and one of those fleeing was Pansy Parkinson. She ran straight into her old best friend Millie, and Draco could hear her plead, "Millie, get me out of here! Please, I've changed my mind, I don't want to be a Death Eater. I lied to the Dark Lord, I saved Harry Potter, just please save me... I want to see Blaise again..."

Millie calmly Stunned Pansy and kicked her away to the side, before advancing with Ginny upon a howling Rowle.

Draco saw Voldemort's fireballs knock down the Longbottoms and threw himself into the fray against the man himself, blocking Voldemort's next sortie, and realized they had Voldemort backed against the Great Hall's wall, throwing out curses willy-nilly in an attempt to turn the tide that was turning against his favor. Draco screamed Voldemort's name and Voldemort's eyes turned hateful with recognition, and he sent a wave of crashing water down upon Draco-

Which failed just before it could hit, as fire sprang upon it and they canceled each other out. Dante joined the duel and began to fight Voldemort with Draco. Even the two of them were scarcely enough to contain the flash of fire and fury that was Voldemort. Draco heaved a sigh of relief when Hermione joined them, shooting out her blue flames at the Dark Lord, fearless as ever- his Hermione, who drew the curses away from him just for a moment...

Nearby, Ron and Luna were outnumbered, fighting Crabbe and Goyle and their sons. Draco screamed for help and the Patil twins rushed over, one of them transfiguring Vince into a ferret as soon as she reached them. Arthur and Molly Weasley were in a knot of thick fighting, gaining ground on Mulciber, while Severus watched their backs prowling forward against his old schoolmate and finally catching him, blinding Mulciber with the Conjunctivitis curse and sending him stumbling helplessly away.

Dante caught a rogue Death Eater trying to help Voldemort with the finger-removing jinx, this time right on the wand hand. The Death Eater's mask dropped as he howled in terror at his fingerless hand. Draco wasn't even surprised to see the face of a top Ministry official from the papers. One might say the Ministry no longer held Hogwarts within their grasp.

Voldemort still wore the burns over half his face that Dante had left, and Dante's fire kept a wall between him and the rest of the fight that preserved the others while they saw to their duels. Seamus Finnigan was making his feelings on the Hogwarts curriculum known to a stumbling Alecto Carrow, while Avery fell to the combined might of Bill and Charlie Weasley. The Order were able to outnumber the Death Eaters in sections, ganging up on them, and more and more of Voldemort's followers fell, but Voldemort was no closer to falling.

He sent out a bang that sent Dante flying back, breaking the shield of fire Dante had built around their fight, and floored Draco with a wave of his wand. Then he advanced outward and yelled, "Sirius Black!" raising his wand with clear intent to kill-

"Voldemort!" Harry Potter screamed, appearing from nowhere in the center of the Great Hall. The presentiment of sudden green light that Voldemort had been preparing died at the appearance of Harry Potter. "Voldemort, it's me you'll be facing now!"

"Stop!" Voldemort ordered, and his Death Eaters brought a halt to their fighting. Many of the Order already had, at the sight of Harry emerging from the ether, still covered in dried blood, still hopelessly beautiful as ever, even after death.

"Harry!" Hermione sobbed. Draco took her by the shoulder and led her to the side of the room where others were fleeing, gathering in shocked groups, at the final showdown between the Chosen One and the Dark Lord. Luna and Ron fell into place beside them, a large wet gash on Ron's forehead that Hermione was too rapt on Harry and Voldemort to fuss over. Luna seized Draco's hand with two of hers and said softly,

"He'll win now, won't he?"

"He will," Draco told her with all the confidence he didn't feel. "He's alive now. And he has to win."

After the rush of cheers for Harry's appearance, total silence had fallen around the hall. Voldemort and Harry faced one another at twenty paces apart, and Harry was the first one to speak. "I don't want anyone else to try to help. It's got to be like this. It's got to be me."

Voldemort let out a dismissive hissing noise. "Potter doesn't mean that. That isn't how he works, is it? Who are you going to use as a shield today, Potter?"

"Nobody," Harry said, and Draco drew a breath, looking over towards where Dante slouched against a far wall before focusing on the two combatants again. "It's just you and me. Neither can live while the other survives, and one of us is about to leave for good…"

"One of us!" Voldemort sneered. "One of us, when the difference in power is only too clear! One of us, Potter! I will tell you which one of us will survive, which one of us will walk away alive and have Draco Black on his knees as a reward-"

Draco recoiled, horrified, as Voldemort's ghoulish laugh echoed through the silent hall. "Yes, Potter, I will take Black from you, the one you love the most! I will have Draco Black, and I

will have your champion Dante, and I will own them, and destroy all the world that defies me!"

"You aren't going to touch Draco!" Harry yelled, visibly angered. "You aren't going to hurt anyone ever again!"

"You will not stop me," Voldemort said, voice sounding as if he felt inevitable as the tide. "No one can stop me. Every man, woman, and child here who has fought for you will die for you, and tonight-"

"You won't be killing anyone tonight," Harry said brashly. "You won't be able to kill any of them, ever again. Don't you get it? I was ready to die to stop you hurting these people-"

"But you did not!" Voldemort protested, which really seemed like Voldemort's own failure he was pointing out...

"I meant to, and that's what did it. I've done what my mother did. They're protected from you. Haven't you noticed how none of the spells you put on them are binding? You can't torture them. You can't touch them. You don't learn from your mistakes, Riddle, do you?"

"You dare-"

"Yes, I dare," Harry said, thoroughly a grown man as he prowled around the floor watching Voldemort, waiting for his moment to strike. No longer the boy who lived, but the man who had, yet again. "I know things you don't know, Tom Riddle. I know lots of important things that you don't. Want to hear some, before you make another big mistake?"

"Mistake?" Voldemort said silkily. "The mistake is yours, Potter. What do you think will save you from me this time? Your great love, little boy, which I shall defile and grind down into the dirt until there is nothing left-"

"You wield the Elder Wand against me," Harry said calmly. "Do you believe it will kill me?"

"This is the Deathstick, the Wand of Destiny!" Voldemort crowed, lifting it up as if for worship by the onlookers. Draco might have considered taking that split second of vulnerability to make his shot, but Harry was steadfast in his words. "I defeated its last owner, so it is mine. No one can stop me with this wand in my hand. I am the most powerful being in all the world-"

"Do you truly believe it yours?" Harry asked simply, and something flashed across Voldemort's face, but too quickly to register as anything except perhaps disquiet before the sneering mask returned.

"I know it mine," Voldemort said contemptuously. "Dumbledore was trying to keep the Elder Wand from me! The fool should have bowed down to me, and handed over what was meant to be mine, and maybe I would have given him a peaceful death, but instead, he fell to the curse of Bellatrix-"

"And you believe Dante killed Bellatrix Lestrange, so he was the owner of the Elder Wand," Harry finished. "But Dante was not the one to disarm Bellatrix. That was Draco. The true master of the Elder Wand was Draco Black."

Again that flicker across Voldemort's face, and Draco wrapped his arms tightly around Luna, whom he could feel quietly shaking.

"But what does it matter?" Voldemort said finally. "Even if you are right, Potter, it makes no difference to you and me. After I have killed you, I have told you how I will attend to Draco Black. After I have had him, his corpse will-"

"But you're too late," Harry told him. "I disarmed Draco in a duel we had, just before we came here."

Voldemort snorted and said nothing, wand hand shaking in what looked preparation to strike.

Harry's hand upon his own phoenix wand was steady as the sunset. Draco could feel himself forgetting to breathe, as he watched the man he loved prepare to triumph or die.

"So it all comes down to this, doesn't it?" whispered Harry. "Does the wand in your hand know its last master was disarmed? Because if it does... I am the true master of the Elder Wand."

"You are master of nothing," Voldemort said coldly. "And I am master of everything. Let me show you."

"But wait," Harry said, "Before you try to kill me, I'd advise you to think about what you've done... think, and try for some remorse, Riddle..."

Voldemort could not have looked more astonished by any proposal. "What is this?"

Harry in that moment did the impossible. He almost managed to sound compassionate. "It's your one last chance, it's all you've got left... I've seen what you'll be otherwise... Be a man... Try... Try for some remorse..."

Voldemort had had enough. Draco could see it on his face, see the twitch in Voldemort's wand arm that meant he was ready to put the Elder Wand forward to continue its long, long legacy of murder. Draco almost cried out Harry's name, but he didn't want to distract him, and besides, he could see Harry pointing his wand too, lips moving at the same time as Voldemort's as they spoke the most different spells imaginable.

This was the moment it had all come down to. This was the moment that marked whether Draco had ruined everything by coming back in time. This was the final test of the Chosen One.

"Avada Kedavra!"

"Expelliarmus!"

The sound that exploded nearly deafened Draco, and set his ears ringing. Red light met green in a wreath of golden flames and then collided, straining against one another. Then the Elder Wand flew from Voldemort's hand, above the blasts of light, and hurtled towards Harry, who caught it in his other hand. The wand had chosen a master.

Voldemort fell. His spindly white form collapsed to the ground the way any other victim of the Killing curse's would, his own Killing curse blasting and ending him. His right hand was still poised as if holding the Elder Wand in its grasp as it fell to the floor of the Great Hall and slackened with the limp hold of death. His half-burned face went limp as well, red eyes forever open, with no one who would ever care to shut them for him.

Harry stood above Voldemort's dead body, a wand in either hand, no shock on his face, just etched there the exhausted halo of triumph, and Draco might have found a new favorite image of Harry to take to his grave.

Silence and then screams, as the Order of the Phoenix regarded with disbelief the dream that had just unfolded before their eyes. Cries of Harry's name filled the hall. Ron, Hermione, and Luna broke free of Draco to run to Harry, embracing him over the body. Luna's heel tread on Voldemort's empty hand, pushing the still-grasping fingers down to the ground again.

Others were rushing forward to embrace Harry, to lay hands upon their savior, but Harry sidestepped them all with grace and darted forward with a Seeker's speed to the side of the Great Hall. There he took Draco by the hands and pressed his lips to his, harder than he had ever kissed him, exultant with the rush of victory, before pulling back and burying his face in Draco's shoulder, hugging Draco like the world was ending or had just ended. It felt like it had, with the immensity of what had just unfolded before their eyes.

And there were cheers for the kiss, and not just from their nearest friends. Draco heard more cries of "Harry!" and "Harry Potter!" and "The Boy Who Lived!" go up undeterred, and finally Harry let go of Draco and let himself be dragged away by his adoring public.

Draco took a deep breath, still in a dream, and reached up and touched his lips.

Unconditional

Chapter Notes

Playlist

To Xaphan,

Thank you for all of your hospitality. You have made me feel exceedingly welcome, in a way I have scarcely felt welcome anywhere.

Thank you for letting me fight with you. I hope my humble contributions helped lead in some small way to the victory we all cherish now.

I am afraid the time has come for me to leave. I will leave during the night to avoid causing any kind of scene. Obligations call me home to France, where I have been remiss from staying away so long. I will return to my ordinary life with fond memories of everyone I left behind here.

I do not believe we shall ever meet again, and if we do not, I will only say again thank you, and I hope the painting of the Antipodean Opaleye I left will serve as a pleasant marker to remember me by.

Sincerely,

Daniel Shaw

Draco put down the letter in abject disbelief. "You're kidding," he said to Fred Weasley, who had been the one to go to Dante's room early that morning and end up finding it. "He's really leaving just like this? Without even saying goodbye?"

"I guess so," Fred said glumly. "Well, I guess it's not like I ever had a fighting chance there anyway, did I?"

"I'll say you didn't," George said with verve, and Fred and him began to squabble good-naturedly, while Draco stared at the letter still, reading its short length over and over for some special hint or code for Draco that simply wasn't there.

Tonight was the night Draco died, and Dante had left him the night before.

Draco headed to the kitchens where Dobby was fast at work, retired from his role as Death Eater smiter and back to the cooking. He would be back in Hogwarts's kitchens, Draco knew, for the new school year, and hopefully the other elves would keep showing him this new level of respect by then.

At the sight of Draco lingering to the side, waiting for him, Dobby finished his immediate obligations quickly, then raced over to Draco. "Draco Black is coming to visit Dobby!"

"Yes, Dobby," Draco said, without an ounce of mirth in his voice. "I've come to visit, because there's something I have to tell you. Can we go somewhere more private?"

Smile still not fading, Dobby led him to a side room full of bags of apples. Draco inhaled the clean, fresh scent and told himself he was ready for this. However Dobby reacted, whatever came of it, it was the right thing to do.

"What is it Draco Black needs to tell Dobby?"

At the last moment, the very last, words about Wooky and Nissy slipped off Draco's tongue, and were replaced by others. "I just wanted to congratulate you, Dobby, about the part you played in the Battle of Hogwarts."

"Dobby led the other house elves in battle!" Dobby said excitedly. "It was like a dream! Dobby fought in the memory of Wooky and Nissy!"

Draco managed not to wince. Merlin, why could he not bring himself to do this? He had done so much worse in his life and times, and yet somehow, he couldn't bring himself to the piece of honesty that would break the way Dobby saw him in those trusting marble eyes. "You fought well, Dobby. I just wanted to tell you that I'm proud of you."

"Dobby is proud of Draco Black!" Dobby enthused, coming over to leap a bit where he stood, he was so worked up with glee. "Dobby was seeing Draco Black duel with Voldemort! Draco Black is so brave! Draco Black is the bravest person Dobby knows, next to Harry Potter!"

The bravest, and yet this damned cowardice held his tongue. "Harry is the bravest, isn't he?"

Dobby smiled widely for his idol, proud and devoted to the end. "Harry Potter is braver than anyone."

"What are you doing in the Slytherin common room again? Merlin, you had better not keep up this habit next year, if you'll be returning to Hogwarts to finish your seventh year," Millie said bluntly, and led him out of the way of the gawking, hero-worshipping children.

Whispers of, "That's Draco Black, he's with Harry Potter," and "That's Draco Black, he dueled Voldemort himself" followed them until Millie encased them in the seventh-year Slytherin girls' dormitory at Xaphan- read, her room. Millie crossed her arms, but Draco tried to tell himself that at least some of the old hostility there was gone now.

"Millie, I have something I need you to do for me," Draco said, just managing to keep his voice from cracking, because even doing it this way was proving immeasurably difficult. "I want you to do something for me."

"Haven't I done enough for you to last a lifetime?" Millie said dryly, but didn't seem completely unreceptive. "Fine, what is it? I reserve the right to say no."

"In the week that's coming up," Draco said evasively, looking away, "I want you to go to Dobby, and I want you to tell him what really happened to Wooky and Nissy."

Millie thought for a moment, perched on the edge of her bed with books in her lap, then shook her head firmly. "No."

"No?" Draco echoed disbelievingly.

"You heard me, Black. The answer's no." When Draco kept eyeing her in shock, she snorted and pushed the books away from her, getting to her feet. "What good will it do, to tell him? Will it bring Wooky and Nissy back?"

"No, but-"

"Then let him keep thinking the sun shines out of your ass, Black. That poor elf worships you. Don't ask me to be the one to break his faith in you. It's good, you know, having faith in something. It keeps you going," Millie waxed philosophical, but Draco could see no argument against her.

"Alright," Draco finally said, just as Ginny let herself into the room and started at the sight of him.

"Draco? What are you doing here?"

"Just thanking Millie," Draco improvised, "For what she did in the Room of Hidden Things, with the other Slytherins. I'm sure she's told you all about it. She saved me from having to fight them, and I'm really glad. And, I mean, I'm really proud of her, after everything she's gone through this year-" *Read, everything I put her through-* "And she still went through the whole battle like a champion-"

Draco found himself lapsing into actually meaning what he was saying, but Millie was having none of it. "Shut your mouth, Black," she said, looking embarrassed. "Save it for someone who cares."

"Millie's not one for flattery," Ginny said happily, plopping down onto Millie's bed as if there wasn't a place she'd rather be in the world.

"What I'll need to talk to you about is the Slytherins' trials," Millie said heavily. "There's Vince and Greg, they're probably fucked. But Pansy did lie to help Potter- when the time comes, you'll have to talk to Potter, see if he'll speak at her trial for her, and who knows, maybe it would do some good if you spoke there too. But that's for another day, right?"

Draco eyed the two of them, sensing how much they would appreciate their privacy then, and anyway, he had already said too much, hadn't he? "Sorry about disturbing you, then. Great work in the battle too, Ginny. I'll see you around."

"See you," they chorused in unison, before turning back towards one another as the door between them and Draco shut.

Draco ate lunch with Luna at the Ravenclaw table, with Ron, Harry, and Hermione all off doing important things related to the aftermath of the battle, many of them press-related. Draco's contribution would, thankfully, be curtailed on that front.

After they finished eating, Draco had an inspiration that he couldn't shake. Luna was planning to go straight to Neville's hospital room to visit, but Draco took her to the empty observatory, where he had used to expect to find Dante. He let them into the moonstone sanctum, thinking ruefully that after there being two people here at Xaphan who could get in here, soon there would be zero. But given what these mirrors could do, perhaps it was for the best, to leave them entombed here, at least until Dante came back, or another worthy scion of House Black came along and started the saga again.

But first, Luna was on the list of those who got to say goodbye to the mirrors as well as to Draco.

"No," Luna said immediately as he took her by the hand and advanced towards the obelisk, dragging her feet. Her voice came out childish, fearful. "No, cousin, I don't want to see."

"Just take a look," Draco told her as they passed the Mirror of Ecidyrue, taking Luna's resistance as further proof she needed this. "You might not find what you expect there. What you see can change."

It hadn't changed for Draco. Harry Potter still waited there as his reflection in the Mirror of Erised. But when Luna stepped into place and Draco stepped back out of the way, Luna let out an earth-shattering screech. "Draco! Draco! Oh, Draco, I wish you could see!"

Draco's hunch was confirmed. He tried not to grin too proudly. "So it is something different than last time in it."

When Luna turned away from the spellbinding reflection to look over at her cousin, her eyes were wet with unshed tears of relief. "It's me, I'm the editor of the Quibbler, I'm at a desk that says so- and there's Neville sitting there with me. He's my husband, we have rings on our hands like Remus and Sirius, you've made us moonstone rings."

Draco's smile was slowly erased from his face as Luna told the last part of the vision, which was patently impossible, unless he really, really did a rush job from here on out. Even then, it wouldn't likely be possible to hand Luna the moonstone rings she dreamed of from his own hands.

It was a shame. Draco could picture someday Luna being the one to propose with one of them, maybe even soon.

Draco wasn't going to get to stand up there at the front with Luna at her wedding.

Calm down, no time to get emotional and sob and give the game away now. Besides, who's to say she and Neville will stay together? Who's to say she'll ever have a wedding to anyone- oh, that's nice, Draco, thanks- just don't think about how she pictures you there, and you'll be absent. Forever absent. No matter how she changes the day to accommodate for you.

Draco forced himself to hold Luna's hand as tears poured down her cheeks in happiness, tears he wished he could be shedding himself. "See, Luna, it's over," he made himself say. "Tom Riddle really is dead now."

"Dead and gone," Luna agreed through her tears, with a giddy sort of little laugh that was so purely and utterly Luna. "Dead and gone."

Luna wanted to go right to Neville after that, perhaps to tell him exactly what she'd just seen in the Mirror of Erised. Draco, having said his final goodbye to the mirrors, did his best to coax Luna not to be too forthright about every part of the vision, not wanting her to scare Neville away- though if Luna had managed somehow not to do that by now, Neville might be indefatigable.

Draco fobbed her off by telling her it would be nice for her to be the one giving Neville flowers for once. She raced off at the mere suggestion to collect flowers from the greenhouse for him, and then the coast was clear for Draco to speak to Neville himself. He had things to say that couldn't wait there either.

Neville was lying in bed, looking battered still, but appealingly so, a vision of undefeated bravery that Draco could see well why Luna wanted to marry. Draco's heart still went out to Neville, having heard the story from Seamus of all he had suffered, and all because of Draco. "Hey, Neville, can we talk?"

"Sure," Neville said, propping himself up in the hospital bed and looking happy to see Draco. "We haven't really since I got back, have I?"

"There was a lot of preparation to do for the assault," Draco hedged, and Neville heaved a sigh.

"I'm still so frustrated I missed that," Neville said with his intrepid Gryffindor idiocy, and Draco forced a smile.

"You didn't miss much," he lied. "And anyway, there's something else." He took a deep breath and looked Neville right in those big trusting dark eyes. "Neville, I owe you an apology."

"An apology?" Neville said, looking surprised as could be, and frowned at Draco. "What on earth for?"

Well, I did deprive you of the chance to kill Nagini. You won't have that to brag about for the rest of your life now.

"It's about the plan we had at the start of the year," Draco said with a heavy sigh. "Kidnapping the Slytherins, and holding them captive while me and the others went off Polyjuiced as them to Hogwarts." Neville nodded, no recrimination showing on his face, so Draco went on. "I don't know if Luna's told you, but the Sword of Gryffindor we stole from Hogwarts ended up being a fake."

"But it took you forward on your path," Neville countered, "And eventually you found the real one."

If Neville wanted to think of it that way, Draco was hardly the person to stop him. But Draco's guilt still needed to be given voice. "I guess I just want to say I'm sorry for involving you in all that. With what happened to you this year. I made a mistake, and you paid for it."

"What?" Neville couldn't have looked more dumbfounded. "It was Luna, Millie, Ginny, and I there, who made the mistake and let them get out, not you." Draco just shrugged uncomfortably, so Neville went on. "Besides, I knew the risks going in. My eyes were open. You didn't trick me into anything. I knew I could even die, but I wanted to take the risk, because it was the path to defeating Voldemort."

Hearing the name come so clearly and fearlessly from Neville's voice was a thing to behold now. "I guess I'm just sorry anyway, though."

"Then I accept your apology," Neville said, smiling tentatively, "No matter how much you don't need to give one, Draco. Bloody hell, you really are too hard on yourself, you know that?"

Draco struggled to think of something to say to change the subject from that particular foible of his. "Your parents must be happy to see you back safe and sound."

"They are," Neville said, and added with more frisson, "And so is Luna."

"Luna," Draco said, and hesitated. "Neville, I need you to take care of yourself. Don't do anything brave and stupid ever again. And if anything ever happens to me, I need you to look after Luna for me-"

"What, is something going to happen to you?" Neville asked with a frown, far keener in intellect than anyone ever gave him credit for, and Draco shifted under his too well-seeing gaze.

"Just if something does," Draco said hastily. "I mean, I dueled Voldemort back there at Hogwarts, Neville. I could have died. It, um, drives in your mortality, you know? And one thing it has me thinking is how bad Luna would take it if I died, and how much she would need you to stand by her."

"You're not going to die, though," Neville said slowly.

"No," Draco lied, and forced a big smile. "I just want to say I know how important you are to Luna, and I hope you'll stay by her side no matter what."

"Of course I will," Neville said earnestly, and then blinked. "Oh, no, is this a threat? Like, you had better treat Luna well or you'll pay for it? Because Draco, there's no need. I love Luna. I would never do anything to hurt her."

Well, that makes one of us. "I'm glad to hear that," Draco said. When Luna returned with her flowers, he could hear Neville telling her bemusedly how Draco had threatened him, as he walked out of the hospital bay.

Harry came home in time for dinner after a long day of publicity and politicking. Remus had accompanied him throughout, so he was exhausted, and submitted to a shoulder massage from Sirius. Sirius thrilled both their weary travelers by announcing he had set up a family dinner catered by Dobby, for just the four of them. It couldn't have been better for Draco's purposes: spending as much time as he could with each of them before it was too late.

Unfortunately, in addition to telling of the ordeals of the day, Remus and Sirius already seemed to be thinking towards the future. "The reporters were all asking Harry what he plans to do now," Remus mused over the lamb and mint sauce. "Harry laughed off the questions, but Harry, do you have any idea?"

"I've always wanted to become an Auror," Harry said thoughtfully, "So I suppose I'll have to take my NEWTs for that." Harry could have looked to far greater things with the Hallows in his possession, but he'd already tossed away the Resurrection Stone in the forest, and intended to put the Elder Wand peacefully in Dumbledore's tomb.

Just the sound of Harry's future, a future without Draco, was enough to make Draco's stomach turn and all the food seem inherently unappetizing. "Can we wait to talk about all this until Voldemort's body is cold in the ground?" Draco said, though his words came out sharper than he intended.

"What, Draco," Sirius said jauntily, "Not looking forward to what comes next?"

"Reporters will want to talk to you," Remus reminded him, "At some point, and they will want to know what's next for Draco Black."

Death. The only remaining question is how swift, and how painful.

"Well, maybe I don't know that yet," Draco snapped, putting his fork down and making the whole dinner awkward.

"Draco," Harry said with a hopeful smile, "We can just become Aurors together..."

"I don't want to become an Auror," Draco said for what had to be the twentieth time to date, and Harry and Sirius looked undeterred in their ambition for him.

"Oh, Draco, come on now, you've been my dueling assistant for how long now?" Sirius said breezily, as if it had been years instead of a couple of months. "You basically have to admit it now, you're Auror material, my boy-"

"Draco doesn't have to commit to anything he doesn't feel comfortable with," Remus said, giving Sirius a glare. "He can take his time to figure out whatever he wants to be. And he can tell the newspapers he's taking his time, too, if that's what he wants."

"But you'll want to take your NEWTs regardless, I suppose," Sirius persisted, "For no matter what you end up doing-"

"What are you and Sirius planning to do next year, anyway?" Draco countered, feeling a spike of animosity creep into him at their collective cluelessness of his fate. "Are you going to remain professors?"

"We'll have to talk to McGonagall about whether the dueling master will remain a professor at Hogwarts now," Sirius said confidently, "You know, now that the war's over. If not, I think I'll have myself a try at taking the Auror exams again, see if I can't get myself back in like the Longbottoms are thinking. What do you say, Draco, would you be proud to see your old man out fighting the dark wizards again?"

"Very proud," Draco said, in a strange enough tone that everyone took notice and fell silent.

"You really don't have to be an Auror like us," Harry reassured him, as if that was the problem here. Not that Draco could let any of them know the size of the real demon that dogged his fate. "You can do something more like Remus. They're going to see about breaking the curse on the Defense position, so Remus can go back to teaching Defense at Hogwarts in the fall."

"Won't Sirius miss you too much if you go to Hogwarts?" Draco joked weakly, but it made all the others relax.

"Rest assured," Sirius said, "We will have frequent conjugal visits," and earned the ew sounds and gagging from his two adopted sons that deserved. Remus covered his reddening face, but looked thrilled secretly at the prospect of the future that awaited them all, with them having survived the war.

"I don't know," Remus joked lightly, "Sirius is getting an awful big head now, as the man who punched Voldemort in the face. I might have to drop him if this keeps up." Remus smiled at Sirius's mock-horrified sound and reached over and squeezed Sirius's shoulder slowly. "You really did take too much of a risk there, Padfoot."

"But I was brave, wasn't I?"

"Oh, yes. Very brave."

It was suddenly awkwardly apparent exactly what Remus and Sirius would be doing tonight, and it wasn't looking over academic materials to help their sons with their NEWTs. Draco

could only hope he and Harry would be doing the same when the time came, before the time they could was gone.

Love wasn't a sufficient word for what Draco felt for Harry. It went so far beyond it. Love had been several years ago, and it had grown since then, inevitably. Maybe a better word was awe, or even worship, however pathetic or unhealthy that sounded. Draco certainly wanted to worship Harry tonight.

The minute they were alone in their room, Draco was taking off his clothes, hands moving at record pace. "What are you doing?" Harry asked, as if he had to ask, and Draco favored him with his most inviting smile.

"Are you complaining?" Draco asked, and slowly, raptly, Harry shook his head.

Harry watched him, looking at Draco's skin as it was bared with a kind of awe of his own. Like he thought Draco was beautiful.

That was good. Draco wanted Harry to remember him as beautiful.

Harry took a seat on the bed by the time Draco was completely naked and coming back to him, eyes lighting up at Draco coming closer as if there was anywhere else Draco ever wanted to be. "This is a sight for sore eyes after a long day," Harry said, sounding embarrassed at his own forthrightness. Draco preened under the attention, feeling his body grow hotter.

"All yours," Draco offered, as he came to a stop in front of Harry, hands linked behind his back to display himself totally.

"All mine," Harry agreed, pushing up his glasses and licking his lips.

Harry pulled Draco into a kiss then, guiding his face by his hair, which his hands tangled into and got good handfuls of, grip sure and strong. Draco groaned at the slightest hint of Harry pulling his hair and leaned over Harry moaning into the kiss, fully overwhelmed by the contact. Harry knew just how to kiss him by now, just the way Draco liked.

And he smelled like heaven, the same unmistakable Amortentia scent colored at the ends with that golden snap of magic, of power- of Harry's power- and as the vanquisher of Voldemort, Harry had just proved he was more powerful than anyone. Draco kissed Harry back with all the passion inside him, ready to drown in the taste of that power.

He climbed onto Harry's lap for easier access, only for Harry to surprise him by tumbling down on the bed, so Draco's back hit the sheets, Harry's weight settling on top of him. Draco linked his arms around Harry's neck to kiss and kiss and kiss him, losing track of where each kiss began and ended, so hazy his mind was going with the sweetness of Harry.

But there was more to Harry Potter than sweetness. When Draco's teeth caught on Harry's lower lip and tugged, Harry let out a low groaning sound and turned aggressive, pushing

Draco's hands backwards over his head and reaching for his wand. Draco watched eagerly as Harry brought it out and cast Manibipiscatus on Draco without a word.

In response, Draco arched backwards beneath Harry, testing the strength of the charm on his wrists- it was a stubborn one- and rubbing his lower half up against Harry. Harry moaned, and Draco spread his bare legs wider, parting beneath Harry in a signal of surrender. "Don't you want to be in me, Harry?" Draco purred, already feeling an ache in the place he wanted to feel Harry, an ache only Harry could satisfy.

Draco had the satisfaction of watching those beautiful eyes widen, and then Harry sprang into action, hands virtually ripping at his own clothes in his haste to get them off. Harry went as fast as he could, but it wasn't fast enough for Draco, who let himself be as much of a brat as he wanted, as he whined, "Hurry up, Harry, or don't you want me?"

Harry actually stopped undressing for that moment to stare at him incredulously. "Want you?" he echoed. "As if I could ever not want you..."

"Show me," Draco said, drawing up his knees to place himself on further display, and watched Harry's pupils dilate as he tossed the last of his clothes away.

"All day," Harry panted, "All these people I had to see- all these hands I had to shake- all these things I had to say- and all I wished was just to be with you." Draco's heart nearly skipped a beat at Harry's serious tone as he added, "God, dragon, you'll never know how much I want you."

"Show me, then," Draco repeated challengingly, and Harry picked up his wand and did the necessary spells. Then he lined up his hardness against Draco's entrance. Draco squirmed at the feeling, wishing he could drive it inside himself. "Please," Draco breathed, and in one great push, Harry sheathed himself inside him.

"Don't wait," Draco gasped, despite the hint of pain. "Just go. Wanna feel how strong you are."

Harry was indeed strong, as he showed Draco then, pushing in and out with brute force. Draco wailed and clenched his enchanted hands to fists.

Harry set a rough pace, and Draco loved every second of it. He loved the hard feel of it, the gorgeous sight of Harry above him, green eyes fixed only on him- loved the blunt slapping sound of their bodies coming together- loved the feel of his magic-bound wrists. Harry was the most addictive thing he had ever known, and the thought he had to give this up was one he desperately tried to keep out of his mind.

He heard himself make loud whining noises as Harry kissed his neck, turning to screams as Harry bit down, and the thought crossed Draco's mind, *This is too good to leave behind.*

At least I'll die with the feel of his hands still on me. With the marks he left on me. When I die, I'll die as his.

"That's it, Harry, give it to me," Draco moaned, spurring Harry to a new burst of speed, kissing the marks he was sucking onto Draco's neck. "Harry," Draco moaned over and over, loving the sound of Harry's name more than any other sound in the world. Except maybe his own name between panting breaths on Harry's perfect lips. He liked the sound of that too.

Draco could tell by the way Harry was breathing that he wasn't going to last much longer. "Harry," Draco panted, "Touch me," and just one brush of that beloved powerful hand on Draco made him go off, spurting onto Harry's fingers with a wild cry of Harry's name. Harry fucked him through the orgasm, sending more waves of pleasure through Draco even after he was done coming. "You're so good, Harry," Draco whispered, "So good, so good," and Harry came inside Draco, filling him up hot and wet, just one more way of claiming him.

After they were done, before Harry went to sleep, he drowsily asked, "My God, what's gotten into you tonight?"

Draco couldn't let Harry so much as suspect at the truth. "I don't know. What's gotten into *you*? You were wild tonight."

Harry tightened his hold onto Draco, gold rose ring digging softly into Draco's arm as if one more claim of possession. "You can't say 'until the end of the war' anymore. The war is over. Now it's just forever."

"Forever," Draco agreed, and lay awake listening to Harry's breathing, until Harry fell asleep.

Draco got dressed carefully that night, as was natural under the circumstances. He put on a cream-colored cashmere sweater his mother had given him, matching trousers, and his HJP necklace. He admired the rose gold where it rested ever secure against his throat, feeling at the individual spots of rose quartz, the stone the shopkeeper had said meant unconditional love.

"Unconditional," Draco said to himself as he stared at himself in the mirror, wondering even now if he was really going to do this. "Unconditional."

He sprayed on his Diospyros lotus cologne, a scent that Harry had always liked. Then he took the R clasp Harry had given him, converted to blue and a new letter for Ravenclaw, after it had been green and an S for Slytherin, and used it to get his hair in perfect order. His reflection was neat and pale, something like Harry might like, even though the effect would be spoiled by being a dead body.

That was, if this was even going to leave a body. He should have asked Grindelwald while he still had the chance.

Deciding his reflection was good enough, he took a deep breath and left the room. Whether Severus knew it or not, his godfather was waiting for him.

The Mirror of Ecidyrue

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Draco had been called *burdensome godson* by Severus more times than he could count. But never had Severus seemed to mean it quite as much as when Draco fetched him out of bed past midnight that night, disrupting Gilderoy as well, for what Draco said would not be a quick and done conversation.

"And is there any reason this no doubt fascinating disclosure of yours cannot wait until the morning?" Severus asked acidly, and *Because one of us will be gone by then* didn't seem a possible answer. Not yet.

"No, I have to tell you now, Severus, it's important," Draco said earnestly. Gilderoy was duly sent away to his own rooms, pouting all the while. Draco gave Gilderoy a hug goodbye, which *really* meant goodbye, and then turned to his godfather.

He was placed in an armchair to wait while Severus got dressed, and then Severus advanced towards him and planted himself in the opposing armchair. "I can assume," Severus intoned, "That this disclosure will be of utmost importance in nature, otherwise this vain boy surely knows what awaits his gall to rouse his godfather out of bed at such an hour..."

"Of course," Draco said, and took a deep breath. "Severus, I have to tell you something. It's something Harry knows, and Ron and Hermione and Luna, but no one else on this planet. And it is important. It's everything. Do you know of the Mirror of Erised?"

"Naturally," Severus said silkily, which made Draco wonder what Severus would see in the Mirror of Erised, but he couldn't let himself get side-tracked.

"Did you know there were two more mirrors created like it? Mirrors Dumbledore never got his hands on?"

"That, I did not know," Severus said with a frown, seeming to fully awaken at the sound of arcane knowledge about to grace his ears. "What were these mirrors?"

"The third one is called the Mirror of Espilce. It's not important, save that it's what I think brought back Dantanian Noir. Anyway, the act broke it, so there's no need to worry about that..."

Severus leaned forward, chin placed in his hand. "You speed past mysteries that seem quite central, but I will humor you, Draco. If the third one is unimportant, then surely you have come to me to talk of the second."

"The second mirror is called the Mirror of Ecidyrue," Draco said, with a surreal feeling, remembering how badly he had wished to tell Severus this when he first came back, and how Dante's curse had prevented it then. Now the words exited freely from his lips.

"Ecidyrue," Severus mused. "Erised is Desire. Could 'Ecidyrue' be 'Eurydice' backwards?"

"Yes," Draco said, pleased that his godfather's intellect let him speed this along to the key parts. "You're familiar with the myth?"

"Quite familiar," Severus said in an almost bored tone, which tended to signify that what they were discussing had special significance to him. Draco wondered if Severus had taken comfort in the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice after the death of Lily Potter, wishing to take the part of Orpheus himself. It was striking, how many people had someone missing, enough to climb down into hell for it. Not that he would tell Severus the inscription on the mirror. He was so sharp he might figure out about the Orphean Bargain right then on his own.

"This mirror has powers beyond the Mirror of Erised," Draco said, taking a deep breath before going on, "Powers to send an individual into the past."

"Time travel?" Severus said, thick black eyebrow arching. "A mirror that is a portal to another time? And have you seen this mirror, Draco?"

"Yes," Draco said, feeling on the precipice of where he could no longer back away. "Yes, I've seen it."

"And have you verified the story about its power of time travel is true?"

"Yes," Draco said, feeling the word fall heavily between them. "Yes, I have."

A long silence, then- "No," Severus breathed, features harsh in the firelight. "It's not possible. Except..."

"It is possible," Draco said in a small voice, feeling somehow embarrassed to have something he knew that his godfather had never known. "Believe me. I know it's hard to. But I think when you think about it, Severus, you'll realize how much it explains."

"Yes..." Severus breathed, and ran a hand roughly over his face and through his hair. "Yes, there is indeed a great deal it would... explain. So many oddities... so many discrepancies... so many mysteries, all with a single answer..."

"Severus, it's true, I went through time," Draco blurted, taking the plunge. "From when I was eighteen to when I was-"

"Eleven," Severus finished for him, and his dark eyes focused powerfully on Draco, analytical bent taking over. "When I met you at school for the beginning of your first year, it was as though you were a different person. At the time, I attributed it to the influence of the talon wand. Now I see I was right in my misgivings about how one child could alter so drastically."

"I went back to the day I got my Hogwarts letter," Draco said, feeling the same sense of unreality at actually speaking these truths that he had with the others, except worse, because Severus most of all was an authority, someone Draco felt could sit in judgment of him. He wondered what Severus would think of him once he knew everything.

At least they had time. It was hours until Draco estimated for Severus's death at Voldemort's hands. In those hours, Draco intended to lay out everything for his godfather: everything he had been, everything he was, and everything he would never be.

"In second year," Severus said in that exacting tone, "You guessed that the monster was a Basilisk, somehow. You often seemed to know things you had no business knowing. And your spell repertoire..."

"Was that of a seventh-year," Draco finished. "Yes. I would have told you, Severus- I tried to- but there was a curse on me. A Langlock. Dante was inside my wand, keeping me from telling anyone the truth about myself. The curse only lifted when Dante was reborn into a body of his own."

"And I take it Mr. Potter was the first person you ever told," Severus said without malice, and Draco nodded. Except wait, he had been going to be fully honest-

"No, that was Grindelwald." Draco gave a teethy smile at Severus's consternation. "What, he guessed! That let him break through the curse, that he knew about me already."

"I should have done the same," Severus marveled. "To think I failed to ascertain the truth for so long! It appears I do not know you half as well as I thought I did, my troublesome godson."

"You do, though," Draco insisted quickly, wounded by the thought. "You know me better than anyone, Severus. Maybe even better than Harry. And I'm going to tell you everything tonight, so you'll know I have no more secrets left before- before the night is over."

"Very well, then," Severus agreed, leaning back in his chair. "It appears you have quite a tale to unfold."

Severus's first moment of looking disturbed was at the revelation of Gilderoy's fate in the blue loop. It seemed to affect him far more than he would own to, hands clenching on the arms of his chair. "One supposes it is... poetic," Severus allowed, "For him to be Obliviated permanently after doing the same to so many others."

"I'm glad I stopped that, though," Draco said fondly, "Even after what he went through after- because I'm glad he got his second chance. Aren't you?"

Severus would only agree mildly, with a, "Perhaps," but he seemed to eye Draco with new appreciation throughout the explanation, sensing that Draco had made changes that had improved the world they lived in.

After that, third year was when Severus started to be truly engaged, when Draco told him, "You never showed me the memories about Sirius and James Potter. I never knew about any of that in the blue loop."

"So we were not..." It seemed beyond Severus's emotional capacity to call them *close* now, even though that was the obvious word.

"We weren't close," Draco said, taking the plunge if Severus wouldn't. "Whatever part you had in Sirius's journey that year, I had nothing to do with it. I was too busy trying to get a Hippogriff executed."

Severus frowned, then blinked and seemed to recall. "Of course that was you in one timeline, not Zabini. What a vain and troublesome boy you really are."

"Oh, you have no idea," Draco said nervously, fearful of losing Severus's approval but with no time or choice but to go forward. "I didn't really do much fourth year, just heckled Harry while he did the Triwizard Tournament. In the blue loop, I mean. In the red line, I knew that the Triwizard Cup would be a Portkey to the graveyard with Voldemort, so Luna and I disabled it using the Felix Felicis. In the blue loop, Cedric Diggory and Harry tied at the Triwizard Tournament, so they were both transported to the graveyard, and Cedric was killed..."

"So now you tell me you have wholesale saved a life from your time traveling knowledge..." Severus mused. "I predict you have saved more. You need not fear tell me what comes next, Draco. I have no doubt you have acquitted yourself admirably, considering what horrors must have come before in the blue loop. I presume it includes more deaths than this timeline."

Yes, many more deaths, including your own. "At first I thought I shouldn't change the timeline, but then I abandoned that, and I tried to stop death where I could..."

"But you could not save Theodore Nott," Severus cut in, and smirked at Draco's terrified expression. "What? It is clear from his disappearance from every battle this year that the boy must have perished. An occupational hazard in the life of a Death Eater, to be sure-"

"Theo didn't die in the blue loop," Draco interrupted, closing his eyes shut tight, not wanting to see the look on Severus's face as he told him. "He wasn't a Death Eater at all, because I never killed his father. See, I've done evil in this timeline, too. I didn't just waltz in and fix everything and save the day. I killed Theo's father, and then I killed him."

Severus did not wait long before responding to Draco's confession, and he spoke in a tone with little surprise in it. "So you killed the Nott boy? I suspected as much."

Draco hung his head down low, only for Severus to bark, "Look at me. Do you suppose I am here to judge you?"

"He would have come after me, over and over. He tried to kill me and he would have done worse, he would have tried to kill my friends, Harry, you-"

"I am not here to judge," Severus said more gently, "Only to try and understand. I recall when Theo tried to kill you at Nurmengard."

"He tried to kill me again during the fall of Hogwarts," Draco blurted out, desperate to make Severus understand at least before he condemned him. "He used the Chamber of Secrets to let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts, and then he brought the Basilisk back to life to try to kill me with it- what?"

Severus had started massaging his temples. "It appears quite weighty, Draco, the things you have kept from me. I assume with you sitting here that you managed to slay the Basilisk?"

"Yes," Draco said quietly, "And Theo, I killed him then too, and I used a vial of Liquid Fiendfyre to burn up the body and the Chamber of Secrets. But I took back my moonstone dagger from Theo's body, and Bellatrix tracked us by it, and told everyone with me that I'd killed Theo- Luna already knew-"

"Draco," Severus said in a troubled tone, "Who else knows of this?"

"Only Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Luna," Draco said miserably, "And, well, my mother," and Severus exhaled sharply. "But wait- there's the Slytherins- Millie, Vince, Greg, Blaise, Pansy. They all know too. They figured it out."

"We must hope they do not publicize this information," Severus said crisply, with much the look in his eyes as he'd had when he found out Draco killed Mr. Nott because of a mishearing. "We do not need the world knowing of another murder of yours, lest they start looking to you as the next great dark lord to conquer."

Draco couldn't believe there had been times when he'd laughed and been delighted at someone calling him that title. "Thank you, Severus. You'll really keep it a secret?"

"As I will keep everything you tell me tonight," Severus said seriously. "This is yours to tell."

"Thank you," Draco said, and would have darted forward and hugged anyone else in relief, but this was Severus, so he stayed in his seat.

"If Theodore Nott did not let the Death Eaters into the school in the blue loop, then who did?" Severus wondered, and Draco embarrassedly lifted a hand.

"Um, that was me. I did it. I was a Death Eater in the blue loop. That's what I've been building up to telling you. Sorry."

"A Death Eater?" Severus breathed, drawing back in visible affront. "Surely not. Not you. You have always been destined for greater things."

"Not the first time around," Draco said, closing his eyes again. "I just did as my family told me. Aunt Bella trained me, the summer before sixth year, and... well... I figured out how to get the school open, with the Vanishing cabinet in Borgin and Burkes... it's a long story... the point is that I did it, Severus, I let Death Eaters into a school, and I will never be able to atone for that."

"Draco," Severus said gently, "If your actions in the blue loop and the lives you have saved are any gauge, you have more than atoned for what you did in a different life."

Draco felt tears come to his eyes at that simple compassion. "But you don't know *everything* I've done. I cursed Katie Bell... I poisoned Ron... I tortured men for Voldemort... I set up Dumbledore to die..."

Severus held up a hand at that, and Draco told him the story of the Unbreakable Vow Severus had made Narcissa, and how Draco's cowardice had made it so Severus had to follow through and murder Dumbledore in Draco's place.

"Draco," Severus said with a wry smile, "It sounds as though it went rather more to plan the first time than the second, when Bellatrix got hold of the Elder wand. Dumbledore had asked me to kill him, months before I ever did. He was dying already, from the blight on his hand, and wanted me to do it. That was his last wish for me."

"What?" Draco breathed, startled to have it turned around to something Draco hadn't known. "He wanted you to do it all along?" A piece of guilt was threatening to drop away, culpable as Draco still was for his own actions knowing the motives behind them. "Dumbledore planned his death?"

"That he did," Severus said, not without a touch of bitterness, "And a part of me is grateful today that I did not have to follow through and do it myself, at least this time around. I can do without that stain on my soul, among so many."

"But if you were given the chance I was," Draco said recklessly, "To go back in time before all your mistakes and fix them, you wouldn't have been a Death Eater, would you? You'd be free of that too. It's not fair, you deserve that chance too-"

Severus's gaze went far away, as if he was imagining a different life now, one where Lily Potter lived and he fought on her side. "There is no point in wondering what might have been. This mirror chose you, for whatever reason, and-"

"There was a spell on it hiding it," Draco cut in, lest Severus think it was any special action of his own, "In the cellars of Malfoy Manor. It would only appear to a worthy member of the Malfoy line."

"Worthy," Severus thought aloud. "What a curious piece of definition to make. And yet it seems you passed it. And you looked back upon your life, knowing what the mirror was, and made the decision to step back in time to try and right your many wrongs?"

Draco coughed in embarrassment. "Actually, er, I did it by accident. When I was drunk."

"Drunk!" Severus echoed in astonishment, and then, that rarest of all sounds, let out a laugh. "You traveled through time and altered all our fates, saving lives in the process, because one day you happened to be in the right place and drunk enough?"

"Um," Draco said, "Yes?"

Another laugh pressed out of Severus, seemingly despite his best efforts. "Drunk!" he exclaimed in wonder. "Drunk!"

"It's not the stupidest thing I've done while drunk," Draco muttered, unwelcome thoughts coming to his head of Theo, and Severus just shook his head- marveling at what a fool his godson was, no doubt.

"Drunk! What other lives have you saved that perished in the blue loop? Who besides Cedric Diggory walks this earth today, simply because my vain godson decided one day to get *drunk*?"

"Sirius and Remus," Draco said, and Severus quieted immediately, sensing the gravity of the confession. "Tonks and Fred Weasley. Dobby. Those are the main ones I wanted to save. And more have lived, just incidentally, because of the butterfly effect, I guess you could say. And Frank and Alice Longbottom, I was never there to bring them back to their senses... we didn't take as many losses at Hogwarts this time as last time, but I think that has the most to do with Dantanian Noir..."

"Who you brought back," Severus finished for him. "Draco, saving a life is no small thing. You cannot brush it aside as if the life mattered nothing. Every human life has a history, and a purpose, and loves and hates of its own. To have brought it back from the brink of death is a feat you should be proud of until the end of your days."

Draco kept on going through the changes he had made to Severus, to the point Severus seemed to become a bit sleepy, but he quickly rallied, sitting up straight and alert. Severus was not one to let anyone see weakness of any kind in himself.

They were talking about the fate of Slytherin's Quidditch teams when suddenly the air before them was filled with something appearing from the ether. The silver frame of the Mirror of Ecidyrue appeared first, with its fateful inscription, then its broad silver face slowly, reflecting both Severus and Draco suddenly back to themselves. Severus sprang out of his seat, drawing his wand at the sudden appearance. Draco got to his feet more slowly, unsurprised but still regretful. He had thought he had maybe an hour more left.

The Mirror was beautiful even translucent, there was no denying it, placed as it was in Severus's dark rooms with only the golden rose tapestry for decoration. It reflected back the tapestry behind them as they walked closer to it, making them appear in a hazy field of golden roses like those at Malfoy Manor. Draco reached the mirror first, and drew his fingers before the inscription. He shouldn't be drawing attention to the words to Severus, but surely the time for any subterfuge had passed with the appearance of the mirror.

"This is the Mirror of Ecidyrue," Draco told a stunned Severus, "The mirror I went through. The mirror I made a bargain with."

Severus's sharp eyes instantly focused, a stricken look coming onto his face like some foretaste of loss. "A bargain?"

"I lied to you, Severus," Draco said, speaking quickly because he was sure the mirror would solidify soon, and then the choice would have to be made. "You died too, at the hands of Voldemort, this very instant. The life I really came back to save was yours. But in order to save it, I have to make a sacrifice."

"A sacrifice- no, Draco," Severus said immediately, mind whirling visibly on his face, dark eyes fastening on Draco like a physical force that refused to let him go. "Do not tell me- a life for a life-"

"A life for a life," Draco agreed, and stepped forward and hugged Severus. Severus didn't return the embrace. "I'm going to miss you, Severus. Good luck."

"No!" Severus cried, pushing Draco away. "No! I cannot allow you to make this bargain for me! Not for me! It must be you to live, Draco, if one must die then you must be the one to survive-"

"It's too late now," Draco said, and turned away from Severus as the mirror finally slid fully into reality.

A woman's voice, strangely familiar, called out to him from the mirror. "Draco Lupin Black. Have you made your choice? Will you make the Orphean Bargain? Will you die so another may live?"

"No!" Severus screamed, grabbing onto Draco's arm and shaking it, but Draco replied,

"Yes, I will."

"Then come into the Mirror of Ecidyrue," said the voice, and Draco shook off Severus like he was nothing and took a step forward.

"This cannot be," Severus cried, "No, Draco, do not trade yourself for me," but it was already done.

Grindelwald died with grace. I want to die with grace, too.

Draco stepped into the Mirror of Ecidyrue. There were brilliant broken reflections of light before his eyes, more like fireflies than he remembered, just missing the color to recall the fireflies that always decorated Severus's Christmas tree.

How pleasant to die looking upon something so beautiful, he thought dreamily, only to hear something beautiful too, a winding, mournful melody he knew somehow to be the Song of Orpheus, the song that had finally reached Eurydice and led her out of hell, leaving Orpheus behind. *Only one may climb out of hell, Eurydice,* the voices sang in Draco's ears. *Only one... only one... only one...*

The broken reflections began to crack, making shattering noises over the song as Draco felt his body shatter apart. It went piece by piece like a breaking mirror, shards of him separating and flying into the Mirror of Ecidyrue while light poured out between them, a brilliant Patronus-blue silver light.

He could see Severus shielding his eyes behind him as he pleaded still for what could not be undone, and then Severus too was caught up in Draco's eyes by the lovely silver light, the Mirror swallowed in it, all that was or ever had been or would be Draco Black disappearing inside it.

So came the death of Draco Black.

Slowly, Draco's eyes accustomed to something other than blinding light. When they did, he had to blink rapidly to make himself understand what he was seeing. It was the room in Malfoy Manor where he had learned Occlumency. The door was open behind him, as if he had just walked in, and now his feet were taking him forward.

Aunt Bella sat there in the chair where she had taught him, an obsidian dagger between her pale hands that reflected the fire.

She smiled as the door closed and Draco's footsteps came to a halt. She folded her hands, leaned forward, and asked with her askew smile,

"Were you expecting someone else?"

"You're not Bellatrix," Draco said immediately, though she looked and sounded and even smelled like the face she wore. "You're- you're Death."

"Can I not be both?" asked the woman before him, and then she cackled, that hideous sound that could come from no one but Bellatrix Lestrange.

Draco instinctively shielded his ears, so loud and echoing the evil laugh sounded in this small room. "I have missed you, Draco Black," Bellatrix said. "Long have I looked forward to seeing you join me beyond the pale."

"You're here to take me to the beyond," Draco realized, and Bellatrix nodded.

"Fitting, is it not, given that you killed me?"

"Dante killed you," Draco objected, and that set off that terrible laugh again.

"Dantanian Noir is you," she intoned, "And you are Dantanian Noir. There is no difference between you. You killed me, Draco Black, and now it is I who will show you the way into the next world."

"Whatever that world is," Draco said cuttingly, "It has to be better than talking to you," and there was that laugh a third time, fateful third, ringing throughout the walls like they could come crumbling down from the mere sound of it. The fire in the fireplace might well be put out.

"Come, then," Bellatrix said, raising to her feet, pocketing her knife, and offering out a hand. "Come with me, nephew, to where Harry Potter can never find you again."

Draco's eyes had gone to the fireplace, so he didn't miss it when the fire flared. He stumbled backwards in shock, and then he heard the sound of a door shutting. It shut behind Dantanian Noir, dressed all in silver that reflected the swelling firelight like an opal flame.

"Dantanian," Bellatrix gasped, hands flying to her mouth. "My Dantanian."

"Draco, my love," Dante said gently. "Did you really think I would have ever gone without saying goodbye?"

"This... this is goodbye?" Draco said, mind sluggishly trying to reckon with Dante, here, on the threshold of the afterlife.

"Goodbye it will be," said Dante, and stepped forward. "Hello, Death. I see you like making bargains. I have a bargain for you. Return Draco Black to Earth, and take me instead."

"What?" Draco cried, but Bellatrix was quiet, eyeing Dante like she had no idea what to make of him. Finally, she snorted, crossing her arms.

"The Orphean Bargain has already been made, Dantanian. You and no one else can save him now. You're too late."

"Am I?" Dante said silkily, and took both of Bellatrix's hands in his own. "I know you, Death. I know how you have waited, how you have hungered, how you have nearly died to call me your own."

When Bellatrix spoke, it was with a deep voice foreign to her, one that frayed at the edges in a way that made it sound unreal, even as it echoed. Draco knew it at once to be the voice of Death. "You have escaped me too long, Dantanian Noir."

"I need not escape you any longer," Dante said swiftly, pressing his point, "If you take my bargain." He stretched out his hand in invitation to Bellatrix.

"Dante," Draco said in disbelief, before Dante turned to favor him with his enigmatic little smile.

"You are not breaking the terms of the Orphean Bargain by taking me, Death. Draco Black will still die. I am Draco Black, as much as he is now. Did you not take the deaths I gave you as his?" Dante's smile grew as it rested on Draco. "Do not fear, little dragon. I have come, as I always have done, to save you."

"Dante!" Draco cried out, no other words coming to his mind or his mouth, just shock there in the face of his would-be savior, as the impossible seemed to be in the process of being weighed to become true.

"You will come with me, then," Bellatrix said in that low growl to Dante. "You will come with me right now."

"Only wait an instant more," Dante said smoothly, and took Draco's hand to give a kiss. "Draco, I bestow upon you all of my powers. My pyromancy, my Astaroth, I leave it all to

you, my dearest darling. I hope that as your life passes, from time to time, you may think of me, and if nothing else remember how very much I loved you."

Bellatrix took Dante's hand from Draco's to grasp in her own. When her skin brushed Draco's, it was as ice cold as a frozen corpse. Draco shuddered backwards from her, backwards from Dante, where they took a step together towards the roaring fire. Then both Bellatrix and Dante were stepping in and were swallowed by the flames.

"Dante!" Draco screamed, but they had disappeared, only flame before him now, and the walls of the room were getting smaller, and Draco was forced to race out towards the door, lest he be swallowed into nothingness with the fire...

Draco's body hit the cold ground of Severus's rooms. The Mirror of Ecidyrue was gone. Only Severus was there, on his knees pleading, "No, do not take him, take me instead..."

"Severus," Draco said softly, touching Severus's shoulder. "Severus, I'm not dead."

The Bastard Dragon

Chapter Notes

Playlist

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Draco and Severus stayed in their places on the floor for some time. Finally, Draco lifted his head.

"It was Dante. Did you see him go into the mirror?" Draco asked, and Severus nodded, stunned. He rose off his knees to help Draco off the floor. "Dante came and took my place."

"I don't understand," said Severus, ashen-faced, the first time in either life that Draco had ever heard those words leave his lips.

"Dante took my place with Death," Draco explained. "Death took him instead of me, because Dante and I were still linked. And I was let go, to live."

"So Dantanian Noir is gone," Severus said numbly. "And you will remain with us after all?" Draco nodded, and Severus seemed to think for a moment, absorbing what had just happened, before lashing out and bashing Draco on the side of the head.

"Ow!" Draco exclaimed, reeling back. "What was that for?"

"That," Severus said with a trembling finger, "Was for attempting to sacrifice yourself to save me, without so much as consulting me on the matter. Your judgment that the world would be better off without you than it would be without myself in it is... deeply flawed. You are so young, Draco, with so much to offer-"

"I deserved it, though," Draco interrupted, and sank into one of Severus's armchairs to nurse his ringing head. "I knew it. Ever since I killed Theo, I knew I deserved to die."

Severus looked deeply troubled as he came to stand over him. "And yet here you are, alive. What do you make of that?"

A slow smile spread across Draco's face. "I'm alive! Severus, I can't believe it, I'm alive!"

"It seems Dantanian Noir has seem to fit to grant you a *third* chance," Severus intoned. "Best not to waste a single second of it." When Draco looked at Severus inquisitively, he sighed and added, "Go and see Mr. Potter. I am sure that is your dearest wish."

"It is, except-" Draco hesitated. "I didn't tell him I was going to do this, to sacrifice myself. If he found out I had been planning to, he'd never forgive me-"

"Then let us cast the events of this awful night," Severus said sharply, "As a secret between the two of us. Not Mr. Potter nor anyone else need know of the decision you made."

"Except you," Draco said, and Severus nodded.

"No one need know except me," he agreed, "Foolish as the decision was."

"It wasn't foolish," Draco said fiercely, and captured Severus's eyes until Severus was the one to drop his gaze and let him leave his rooms.

Harry was still there sleeping, just as Draco had left him. Draco couldn't believe his luck, just to get to lay his eyes on that beautiful face again. Let alone to get to climb back into bed with Harry, and feel truly and securely Harry's. He relished in the physical evidence on his body of the love they had made now, focusing on it as he drifted off to sleep. He belonged to Harry Potter, and he couldn't think of anything that could ever make him happier.

Harry woke Draco up the next morning with a kiss and a caveat. "I'm going to have to be off for most of the day, doing publicity and political things. Kingsley's Minister of Magic now, so when he needs me by his side, I can't say no."

"Of course not," Draco said fondly. "Just as long as you come back."

Harry turned and eyed him strangely. "What do you mean? Of course I'll come back."

Draco felt a dumb smile spread across his face. "Of course you will. You'll always come back to me, Harry Potter."

This unexpected bout of sentimentality earned him a long, open-mouthed kiss from Harry, who didn't seem to be able to get enough of kissing Draco recently. Draco kissed Harry back whole-heartedly, thinking, *I get to keep this. This is still mine.*

But what in the world do I do now?

So I'm going to live, was Draco's thought for the rest of the day. *What does that mean? What exactly am I going to do with myself?* He had been planning for so long to be gone by the morning of today, May 2, 1998. What did it mean for him now to be alive, for the foreseeable future? He didn't know what was meant to happen, as his time of foreknowledge came to a close. He knew he didn't want to be an Auror, but that was about the only thing he was sure about.

Maybe he was meant to become an Unspeakable after all-

No, he wasn't. Too many secrets already for a lifetime.

Being alive meant getting to see his friends, for one. He walked out with nothing else to do to Xaphan's beaches, too cold to swim in year-round but still a good place to be alone. When he

arrived at Far Point, though, he found he was not alone, and he couldn't have been happier about it.

"Striker!" Draco cried out, unable to restrain himself at the sight of his best friend, whom last night he had thought he had seen the last of. He broke Hermione's solitude by racing over and virtually picking her up, he hugged her so hard. She squealed but did not protest, hugging him back with surprise.

"Draco, what are you doing here?"

"I came out here to think," Draco said contentedly, "Just like you, I suspect, but it's better to get to see the one and only Hermione Granger than mope alone!"

Hermione laughed off the compliment, cheeks reddening, before her gaze focused at the last part of the sequence. "What do you mean, mope? What could possibly be wrong, Draco?"

"What could be wrong with you, to want to be this alone?" Draco countered, not exactly sure where to start with his own list of uncertainties, and she heaved a meaningful sigh.

"Oh, Draco, it's my parents," she sighed, and Draco immediately felt like an asshole for considering his own problems worthy of a thought. "I still need to talk to Gilderoy about going to Australia to find them- I suppose I'll have to get permission to take him from Sirius or Remus, and-"

"Don't worry about that part," Draco cut in. "I'm a member of House Black, and I can order him to go wherever I like."

"Oh, and we'll have to work it around his schedule teaching castle-building classes, once those resume-"

"Hermione, you're not out here by yourself because you're worried about Gilderoy's schedule. Tell me what's really going on."

Hermione looked at him with an assessing look, as if unsure if she wanted to voice her darkest thoughts, then seemed to decide that if she would to anyone, it might as well be Draco. "What am I going to say to my parents once we find them? I mean- once Gilderoy gives them back their memories. How am I going to explain what I had done to them?"

"With the truth, Hermione," Draco said carefully. "I'll help you-"

"No, I think that part is something I'll have to do on my own," Hermione said with a choked-off little cough, and Draco realized she was close to tears.

"You don't think they'll understand," Draco realized, going over to hug her around the shoulders. She didn't resist the comfort. "You think they'll... feel betrayed."

"Wouldn't you, in their place?"

"In their place," Draco said, honestly trying to project himself into the mind of the kind, welcoming Grangers, "I think I'd be thrilled my daughter is a war hero."

"A war hero," Hermione laughed off, but Draco nodded intently.

"You are, Hermione," Draco said earnestly, "And I'll say it to anyone you want to hear it, my best friend's a hero of the Second Wizarding War-"

"Oh, stop it!" Hermione exclaimed, covering her face. "My parents don't know about all that, they'll just know their daughter threw them away-"

"You hid them to keep them safe," Draco countered, "And now you're bringing them back to their old lives again. If they have a problem with it, I hope they would have been happy facing down Bellatrix Lestrange and seeing how that went for them."

"Oh, Draco," Hermione said, and flung herself on him, not crying but overwrought. Draco hugged her tightly, and willed the Grangers when the time came to understand.

On their way back, Hermione and Draco were caught by an ebullient Ron. It turned out they were just the people he'd been looking for. "Dean wants to get a game of football together in the courtyard. Will you play with us?"

"Absolutely," Draco said, thinking it was just what Hermione needed, and perhaps what he did as well, to get their minds off heavier things. "Can you wait for us to go change?"

"Sure," Ron said, and directed him to the courtyard where they were to meet. When he and Hermione arrived changed into their football gear, they found Dean, Seamus, and Luna waiting for them in similar clothes, along with Neville by the side, just there to watch. Draco gave Luna a massive hug for her superlative accomplishment of just existing, as well as being so damn cute.

He took up his place before one of the conjured goals with slight trepidation, after it being so long since he had done this, but mostly relief that he was still around to get his ass kicked at football. Nor did the universe disappoint, as the other team of Dean, Seamus, and Hermione beat up his team of Ron, Luna, and himself like it was kingdom come. In the small space, it was easy for Hermione to score goals on him, living up to her nickname, and a thud of pride went through Draco along with disappointment with every one she pinged in past him.

By the time the match was declared over, with a not-so-respectable scoreline of 7-2, Draco was ready to collapse on the ground in exhaustion. "It's too bad Harry's not here to watch," an equally exhausted Ron said as he sank down beside him on the grass. "He loves it when you play football."

"What," Draco said, wrinkling his nose, "When I get all muddy and sweaty from playing keeper, you mean?"

"Yep," Ron said happily, staring up at the blue sky like he too was very pleased to be alive. Draco wondered if he'd been recently having... productive personal time with Hermione, to account for such a good mood, but then again, they were all in a good mood, shaking hands after the match without acrimony. The weather was just at the cusp of summer, they were all

pleasantly exhausted, and they had all gotten through the Battle of Hogwarts, to make it back here to the normal again.

Neville leapt down from his perch on one of the stones to kiss and congratulate Luna regardless of her loss. They could be observed going off together with Luna chattering about how she'd managed to tackle Dean once, and oh, he'd seemed rather winded by it, hadn't he?

"She didn't get me," Dean lied, and they all laughed, and Hermione bent down and obligingly gave the felled Ron a kiss, and Draco wanted to drink in this moment and keep it forever.

Remus wanted to see him before they ate dinner in the Great Hall, to apologize for having pushed him about his career choices at dinner the past night, particularly with Sirius's pressure about becoming an Auror. Remus, for his part, seemed like he could happily do without one less Auror in the family.

Draco was grateful for the apology, unwilling to say exactly why he'd been so reticent to look towards the future. Moreover, he knew it was a matter of when and not if that he would tell Remus and Sirius about his true past, and he had to think about when that when would come.

Not to mention he was considering saying a word about it to Neville. And maybe even Millie. There was a great deal he could hopefully make her understand if he told her about his past. And Ginny would have to be told with Millie, and...

Remus and Draco made it into the Great Hall with Harry still absent from the high table, having been kept late by Shacklebolt. It was almost like Harry was already a working Auror, if Shacklebolt had still been head of the Aurors instead of Minister of Magic. Draco made conversation with all of the others, but he did miss Harry. So accustomed had he become, to having Harry at his beck and call constantly. He supposed that would have to change, once they were more grown up.

He still had to keep from jumping out of his seat when Harry arrived late at the end of dinner nonetheless, trying to play it cool while all his insides lit up at the sight of his Harry traversing the hall towards him.

Harry sat at his usual seat, talking of shake-ups at the Ministry, and Draco did not feel grown-up at all. All he wanted was to take Harry off somewhere and once again reassure himself that Harry was his, by purely carnal means.

He wondered if this feeling around Harry would ever fade. Surely it would have to, once they got older. It would be simply impractical if it didn't. Maybe it would be replaced by something else.

From the way Harry rested his hand on Draco's thigh under the table during his belated dinner, his mind was not far from where Draco's was right now. "Missed you," he whispered in Draco's ear, breath hot against the lobe. Draco shivered, mind filling with images of Harry above him, taking him.

There was one thing Draco wanted to do that couldn't wait, though, even for that. He gathered together Harry, Ron, Hermione, Luna, and Neville, and took them aside for a Portkey, to the deserted island where Dante had showed his powers to the higher-ups of the Order.

"So," Draco told his waiting friends, who had not yet been graced with an explanation for their travel. "You know how Dantanian Noir left Xaphan mysteriously in the middle of the night?"

"Of course, it was quite disappointing," said Luna.

"Well, before he was gone, I saw him," Draco went on.

"I knew he wouldn't miss the chance to say goodbye to you," Harry muttered jealously.

"He told me that through our connection, he was giving me back his powers. That means his pyromancy." Draco waited to make sure they were all ready for the next part. "And his ability to turn into a dragon."

An impressive quiet greeted that borderline nonsensical announcement. Finally, Ron's brash voice broke the silence. "No way! You brought us here to tell us you think you can become a dragon?"

"No," Hermione said, "He's brought us out here to see if he can. Or isn't that right, Frankenstein?"

Scarcely had the nickname ever felt more apt. "That's right."

"No!" Harry objected immediately, stepping forward with arms out as if to bar the idea from discussion. "It's too dangerous."

"For you all?" Draco asked, caustically, though it was true he wasn't sure how hard it would be to control a dragon's powers...

"No, for you," Harry said earnestly, and caught Draco's hand. "I won't have you put yourself in any more danger-"

"I think he should try," Neville said, and received a load of surprised looks. "What, he's going to try it eventually, isn't he, with or without us. It might as well be with us here."

Harry let out a frustrated sigh but didn't try to argue the point. Instead, he let Ron's nervous laugh take over proceedings. "Are we really arguing over whether Draco is allowed to try and turn into a dragon?" Ron marveled.

"Someone's told him he can do it," Luna said thoughtfully, "And now that he's heard that, it's only a matter of time how long it will take before he has to try and find whether it's true."

"Not that I have any idea how to do this," Draco put in wryly. "Honestly, I'm open to suggestions."

"If this is anything like being an Animagus, then it's a mental trigger. Under your conscious control," Hermione said logically.

Draco laughed, taking a step back from the others. "What, I just think really hard about wanting to turn into a dragon, and I turn into one?"

"Worth a shot," said Ron, who showed his confidence that something at least would happen, by stepping back too and giving Draco a wide berth.

"I'm sure you can do it, Draco," Luna called, and Draco gave her a grateful smile before closing his eyes.

He tried to pull up the image of Astaroth in his mind like he was picking happy memories for a Patronus- Astaroth over Hogwarts, over Malfoy Manor, in Dante's painting... Then he tried to think of himself as that, but his mind boggled at the cognitive leap. It didn't make sense, to think that Draco could be anything but himself. Even if Dante had made the transformation look as easy as breathing.

Frustrated, Draco opened his eyes and stared in the faces of his friends. They all looked fearful- Harry especially- except for Luna, who looked expectant. That's right, he told himself. *Luna believes I can do this.*

And he didn't want to let Luna down. That was the beauty of being alive after all. He never had to let Luna down ever again.

He focused anew on the image of a dragon, imagining his skin turning to scales, his arms to legs, his hands to ruthless claws. He unconsciously turned his own hands into claws, which made Ron stifle a laugh, but he couldn't let that break his concentration. He was going to become a dragon, and damn the entire world that said it wasn't possible. Damn his father, who'd always treated him as far too weak and useless for something like this. Damn his mother for standing behind his father. Damn everyone who had ever stood in his way.

It was when Draco became angry enough that he turned into a dragon.

One moment he was standing firmly on human feet, the next he wasn't. One moment he was Draco Black, and the next he was a creature with claws and fangs. His skin prickled as it changed, a wave over it like an unexpected touch as it all turned to glimmering opaline scales. His insides felt bizarre as they rearranged themselves and grew. Draco's range of eyesight was suddenly much higher, as he stretched up and up, spine cracking painlessly and reforming into something curved and sleek. His nose reshaped itself to a snout, and he wanted to reach out and touch it, but his hands had both become talons like extensions of the talon wand, instruments of unmistakable power.

"Look at me!" Draco tried to say, but it just came out as a wordless roar. His friends, so much shorter than him now, seemed to shrink back.

"Draco, is that you in there?" Hermione called up shakily, and in a moment, Draco found he had the muscles in his neck to take his great dragon head and nod.

He lifted that head then to the heavens and roared again, this time of his own accord, loving its vast foreboding sound, while he heard the others shouting, "He really did it," "Draco's a dragon..."

"Do you think you can fly?" Luna called, and Draco didn't have to be asked twice. His legs somehow knew how to move for this, while feeling came at last to the ponderous wings on his back. They flapped through the air in long strokes as he took off, taking a long running start only for his wings to grant him elevation. There were startled cries and screams of delight from the others, so Draco roared too as he ascended into the sky.

The air rushed over him, past him, crushed into submission by his massive shimmering wings. The island grew smaller beneath him as he took off higher, his friends turning into tiny dots and then nothing below him as he soared effortlessly into the clouds. But then he swooped down with a laugh inside at the sheer joy of it, plunging like a Seeker diving for the Snitch, and hovered in the air above his friends. They came running to him as he floated without a care, no broomstick, nothing holding him up in the sky but his own wings.

"Draco, that's bloody brilliant!" Ron screamed, and Draco spun around in the air to show off, prompting more exclamations of awe.

"Yes, I do think you can fly!" Luna yelled up, waving her arms. Draco kept up his diving around in a looping circle above them until it made him dizzy.

"Come back here!" Harry yelled. Reluctantly, Draco landed on the ground before them, thinking Harry wanted to put an end to his fun, only for Harry to say, "I want to ride the dragon. Can I, Draco?"

Draco thought of how Dante had managed it, and extended one of his long wings for Harry to climb up. He felt Harry's sneakers slide over his scales right away, even as Hermione protested that this was all new to Draco, it was too dangerous...

Except it wasn't, because Draco felt already the instincts all present, as if he'd been a dragon his entire life. He waited until Harry had gotten firmly in place on his back and then took off to Hermione's squeals of protest, ready to prove her wrong, taking Harry up into the sky with him where he belonged.

He could hear Harry's giddy laughter as he gave him an impromptu tour of this barren island, circling around the whole land mass before dropping down one of the cliff faces, taking a sheer dive down to the sea. He felt water spray up beneath him, cold and refreshing seawater from grazing the surface of the ocean. He flew Harry over the ocean around the island again, before ascending up higher, to let Harry see how high Draco could go...

Not too high, though, as to not stress Harry's human lungs. Draco dropped down to whip showily past their friends, who all cheered for them now as they passed, even Hermione, every one...

When Draco finally let Harry off his back, extending the wing for him to climb down, Harry scrambled off laughing, talking of how mind-blowing the flight had been. Luna immediately rushed forward calling for a ride of her own, but Hermione put a swift stop to that.

"Not tonight, Luna. Draco must be tired. He's just learning," she said. Draco nodded in agreement, only to preen happily when Harry stroked his huge snout.

"Do you reckon you can turn back, Draco?" Neville asked slightly anxiously, and Draco gave another nod before concentrating.

The other way around took no effort at all. A whipping, snapping sound in the air, and Draco could feel his wings withdrawing inside his back, his scales turning to skin, his size everywhere shrinking to accommodate his new frame as Draco Black, robes fully intact. Ron clapped his hands, Neville and Luna cheered and whistled, and Harry started, as he was now stroking air. Draco caught both of Harry's hands in his as he turned to all of them and asked, "So? How was it?"

"Show-off," Ron said affectionately.

"I've never seen anything like it," said a wide-eyed Neville.

"I mean, honestly, Draco, you could have been killed," went Hermione.

"You must promise to give me a ride next, it's my turn," beamed Luna.

And Harry wrapped him in his arms, telling him, "That was the most incredible thing I've ever seen," before giving him a well-earned kiss.

Draco broke off it eventually, though, to put forth the question still preying at him. "And how did I look?"

He received blank stares. "Um, like a dragon?" Neville tried.

"No," Draco said, and added shamelessly, "I mean, was I a pretty dragon?"

Silence greeted his question, until the others dissolved in fond laughter. "Yes, Draco," Harry said obligingly. "You made a very pretty dragon."

"So," Harry said that night as they got ready for bed, "You can turn into a dragon."

"It's not very useful, though, is it," Draco downplayed it. "Can't really see when it would come in handy-"

"Draco, it's incredible," went Harry, and Draco shook his head wryly.

"Guess you must feel vindicated, all those times you called me dragon," Draco jibed, and Harry shrugged.

"You can't call me dragonslayer anymore. Because you know I would never hurt you." When Draco rolled his eyes, Harry added, "And yes, I know you mean it as a pun."

"What am I to call you, then?" Draco laughed. "I'm not one for baby, darling, sweetheart, honey, angel..."

Harry's ears had gone red. "I wouldn't mind any of those from *you.*"

"Too bad, you're not getting them. You deserve something more special. How about..." Draco wracked his brain, but nothing creative came up, until... "Green eyes," Draco tried, and Harry smiled.

"I'll take whatever endearment you want to call me," Harry agreed.

"You've got it bad for me, green eyes," Draco said experimentally, and was rewarded with a kiss he could feel down to his toes.

"There's just one more thing," Harry said, breaking off. "You said Dante had given you more than just the dragon power."

"That's right, the pyromancy," Draco realized, and then flashed Harry a devilish smile. "Wanna try it out?"

"Yes, let's try it," Harry said eagerly, and Draco gave him a sideways look.

"Did you *like* my pyromancy, Harry?"

"Yes," Harry said unhesitatingly, "It was amazing," and Draco was suddenly filled with the desire to be a pyromancer again even if it killed him.

He didn't have to try that hard. It was so much easier than becoming a dragon, as something he'd done before so many times and had only temporarily had lost to him. He snapped his fingers, and a flare of orange fire appeared in his palm like his pyromancy had never left him. He stared at it experimentally, and it soared in an arch around their room, illuminating every inch of Harry's spellbound face.

Draco intensified the flame, turning it Patronus-blue and wreathing the entire room with it from above, kept perfectly in control by his own mind. Harry heaved out a breath, shaking his head in wonder, and Draco stepped closer to him, exultant.

"Looks like it's back," Draco said smugly, "Guess you have to say it *is* amazing," and Harry took Draco's hand that had held the flame, turning it over and over in his.

"The skin's still hot," Harry marveled, and pressed a long kiss to the palm. Draco shivered at the sensation and leaned forward to kiss Harry with the fire all above them, Harry's perfect face cast in blue firelight.

"You do like it," Draco breathed against Harry's mouth, "I mean, you *really* like it," and Harry took Draco and threw him backwards over the bed. The sound of Harry casting Manibipiscatus had a Pavlovian effect on him by now, leaving him panting and eager. When Harry looked ready to leap forward on top of him, though, Draco made blue fire flare from both of his trapped palms which lay upwards.

"Dragon," Harry breathed in reverence, and Draco gave him a playful snarl.

"Try and touch me if you dare," Draco called, baring his teeth. Harry stared at either flame in Draco's hands, chest heaving, looking never more ready to have Draco as his own. He leaned over Draco with Draco holding the fire keeping him just out of reach, looking like a predator foiled at the final hurdle before he could take his prey.

So Harry slid down the bed and leaned forward. He carefully kissed Draco until the flame in both hands ebbed away, then gave twin kisses to the overheated palms.

"You don't scare me, Draco Black," Harry whispered. Draco was tempted to make fire again, but not as tempted as he was by the prospect of Harry.

"You like playing with fire?" Draco whispered, and Harry nodded.

Draco went first thing the next morning to visit Lucia. Oh, and Mother was there too.

"Guess what, Lucia," he whispered to the quiet baby. "Your big brother can turn into a dragon."

"What was that?" Mother said. Draco pushed back his resentment by reminding himself that this would be one of the last visits like this. It should be very soon that Mother was taken off to Azkaban...

"I'll speak at your trial," Draco said apropos of nothing. "If it would help. And I mean, if you would want me to."

"I believe it would help a great deal," Mother said warmly. "Thank you, Draco."

"And you know everyone here at Xaphan will look after Lucia while you're gone. And Aunt Andromeda is considering adopting..."

"Everyone at Xaphan including you," Mother put in. "You made a promise to take care of Lucia. Keep an eye on her. Do you stand by it?"

"Yes, Mother," Draco said, meaning it for once, "That's a promise I mean to keep."

"Then why don't you hold her?" Mother offered, and Draco took his little baby sister in his arms, reflecting that, after all, it really was quite a thing to be alive.

"Sirius, Remus," Draco said, "There's something I have to tell you." Harry had offered to be here for this conversation, but Draco had opted to handle it on his own. "Something about myself that you don't know. And as my parents, I think you should."

"Don't be so mysterious, dragon-face," Sirius said impatiently, earning a stern look from Remus. "What's going on? Don't keep us in suspense." He got a playful look, and added, "If

you're planning to come out, I'm afraid to inform you it's a bit late on that front."

Draco stifled a laugh. "No, Sirius. But it is a secret. Do you believe in time travel?"

"What an odd question to ask," Remus mused. "Of course time travel is real. Don't tell me you're interested in becoming an Unspeakable again."

"Do you believe it could happen to someone you know? Someone close to you, without you ever knowing?" Draco decided not to keep them in suspense any longer. "It's me. I'm the one who's traveled through time."

He had to get through a great deal of Sirius's uproarious laughter before he could get Sirius to take the proposition remotely seriously. Remus, though, took it seriously from the first, brown eyes focusing on him assessingly in a way that seemed to suggest, yes, Remus could very much believe it of their enigmatic adopted son Draco.

Draco explained about the mirror and going back from 18 to 11, with Sirius slowly going from laughing to open-mouthed and stunned. Sirius still didn't seem quite to believe him, though, until out of the blue, Sirius blurted, "Is that how you knew I was innocent? Why you decided to help me?" Draco nodded, and Sirius took proceedings far more gravely after that.

"I was a Death Eater," Draco eventually had to tell them, and Sirius's reaction was not good. He peered out at Draco hostilely, upon which Remus had to remind Sirius that he was the beneficiary of Draco giving him a second chance, so he had better remain receptive to giving Draco one.

"I know I should have chosen differently," Draco said uncomfortably, not sure if he should say he didn't feel he had a choice at the time. It sounded like a hollow excuse by now, after so many times saying it.

"Draco, you followed your parents," Remus said consolingly, "It's the most natural thing in the world," and Sirius listened more sympathetically from then on, taking his lead from Remus as he so often did. Sirius did end up looking outraged, but by the details of what Death Eater training had constituted with Bellatrix.

"Having that woman invade your mind, and torture you over and over," Sirius said with a shudder, "It's no wonder she's your Boggart."

"It must have left you very traumatized, Draco," Remus said intelligently, "And this must be very difficult for you to relive right now. Thank you for making the effort to share this with us, when living it must have been so heavy and hard to bear."

Unexpectedly, Draco felt tears come to his eyes. "It was what I deserved, for agreeing to Voldemort's mission," Draco managed to get out, and both Sirius and Remus powerfully shook their heads.

"You didn't deserve any of that, Draco," Remus said kindly, "You were just a child," and Draco dropped his face into his hands and began to sob. Sirius came over and hugged Draco, and Draco buried his face in Sirius's familiar, reassuring shoulder. Remus hugged him from the other side, the two of them flanking him like sentinels standing against his past.

"I tortured people too, though," Draco managed to whimper out between sobs. "Voldemort made me. Death Eaters who messed up... he liked making me do it because he could tell I hated it. I got good at the Cruciatus curse, it was me or them- so for me it was always them..."

"You should never have been put in that situation, Draco, you were just a child," Remus continued to soothe him, but Draco shook his head.

"They say you can't make the Cruciatus curse work if you don't mean it. I've seen it in action, it's true, I've seen it not work because the caster didn't really want to torture. And I could do it. I'm so ashamed," Draco groaned, and collapsed into hysterics, feeling pulled back into that moment and truly broken. Only Remus and Sirius's steadying grasps on him were keeping him tethered to today's reality, where he would never have to torture anyone ever again.

Draco managed to get out the story of the vanishing cabinet and letting Death Eaters in and setting up Dumbledore's death, all the while expecting one of them to recoil in disgust. But neither of them did. "I'm disgusting," Draco sobbed out, "I'm so vile and disgusting, I can't bear it," and Remus pressed a kiss to the top of his head.

"You're nothing of the sort, Draco. Look, we can talk about this as much as you want, as often as you want, but what will never change is that we both love you so much. So, so much. We couldn't be prouder of our son."

Since everything was coming out, Draco let out the darkest part of his story, the part set in the red line. "I'm not changed, though. I haven't. I've killed in this timeline, so many times... I killed Pettigrew... Periander and Maledictum... Cantankerous Nott... Karkaroff... Grindelwald... all the people Dantanian Noir killed because of me... and Theodore Nott. I killed Theodore Nott, are you still going to tell me it's alright? Because it's not, he was a child too. I killed Theo and why are you smiling?"

"Because, Draco," Sirius said, almost fondly, "We already knew. Well, we discussed it with Severus after your mother's arrival at Xaphan, and we pretty much came to that conclusion. We knew Nott had been after you, and it was likely that in the fall of Hogwarts, he put you into a situation where it was kill or be killed-"

"He tried to kill me," Draco acknowledged. "But I didn't have to kill him." He thought back to all those torturous, battle-like talks with Millie over Theo's fate. "I should have showed him mercy. I didn't."

"Oh, Draco, you shouldn't have been carrying this all yourself without talking to us," Remus said with a heavy sigh, hugging Draco's shoulders hard. "Yes, you have killed, but never except in defense of yourself or others, or in mercy. You are a good person, my boy, a good person..."

Draco dropped his head onto Sirius's shoulder and let Remus hug him from behind, dissolving into sobs that kept any audible words from coming out for a time.

But once they were done, Draco felt clean inside, in a way he hadn't for so long, he couldn't remember.

Because school was yet to resume until the Tuesday of that week, that left tonight, Sunday night, free. Sirius decided there ought to be some form of festivity to celebrate their victory. They couldn't hold it in the middle of Xaphan or every student would try to gate-crash, so Sirius announced it at the site of Far Point, legal adults only. (And their dates, which thankfully let Luna and Ginny attend.) The Order of the Phoenix, including the new minister Shacklebolt, made the trip to Xaphan to join them all.

Fred and George were beginning work already on reestablishing Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, and they proved equal to the task of providing the last-minute party with fireworks. Soon explosions were going off over the beach in the night, brilliant bursts of color in every shade of the rainbow. Draco shouted out at each particularly exuberant one, praising the work of their fully intact twins, reckoning that it was definitely a good thing he had been sent back in time, if it meant Fred was alive to set loose these beautiful fireworks.

Meanwhile, Fred and George were simultaneously working as DJs, making the beach bonfire seem further alight with music that made everybody move. Everyone, that was, except for Severus, but he could be seen at one of the tables seated beside Gilderoy, whispering quietly, and that seemed good enough for both of them.

Luna seemed intent on cutting up the floor all night long with Neville. Millie and Ginny were dancing openly, to what seemed the bemusement but acceptance of Molly and Arthur Weasley, who were dancing as energetically as the youngsters. Frank and Alice Longbottom shared their youthful verve, with Frank spinning Alice in great whirls at the heights of the music. Tony kissed a blushing Padma beside the fire as they danced.

Weasleys abounded, down to even Peter, who had brought Penelope Clearwater and danced with her stiffly. Bill and Fleur made their wedded bliss apparent, Charlie appeared with a fellow dragon tamer who didn't seem to be able to get enough of him, Tonks and Cedric danced with Tonks's hair an effusive bright yellow, Ron and Hermione danced vigorously in defiance of Ron's clumsiness, and Sirius and Remus put on a show despite Remus's reluctance, with Sirius showing up everyone there as the best dancer that night.

Even Aberforth Dumbledore, busy with reestablishing a semblance of normalcy in Hogsmeade and at the Hog's Head, made his grudging appearance and had a dance with Professor McGonagall. The night's dancing queen, she also took turns with Professor Flitwick, Alastor Moody, and more surprisingly, Professor Sprout. The dance floor was truly buzzing, as if someone had called out, "Dance if you defeated Voldemort!"

And of course Harry insisted that he and Draco join in the merry chaos, and so they did, careening between couples at breakneck pace as Harry's hands gripped Draco's waist like something precious he never wanted to let go. Fireworks kept going off above them as they

danced, the very image of victory. "You're holding me so tight," Draco laughed, squirming, and all Harry said back was,

"Good!"

Harry got swept away by his fans and well-wishers for a while, so Draco had a moment alone. He found himself going to one of the displays and taking down a hyacinth from a group of them, whose bright violet hue shone out in the night. He walked out to the edge of the beach, took a seat with the hyacinth draped over his knees, and thought of Dantanian Noir.

Dante should have been there to see this. He should have.

But he had given up everything for Draco, and in return, all he asked was that Draco remember how much he had loved him. It still bewildered Draco, that someone like Dante could love him so much as to sacrifice himself, but so it was, and every other mystery about Dante would have to remain unsolved.

"I miss you, Dante," Draco whispered, and got up with the hyacinth still in hand. "Thank you."

He laid the hyacinth down in the water as if it was a gravestone, putting it there to be swept out by the tide to sea. And soon the flower disappeared, just like the bastard dragon.

Harry found Draco sitting by himself on the edge of the waves, letting the night breeze pour over him. The fireworks had long since faded in the air, leaving a smoky haze around the beach, putting Far Point into the air of something surreal, detached from reality. Draco didn't want to leave it and come back down to earth. He wanted this night never to end, for the future never to come, where he had to decide what to do with his life, now that Voldemort was dead and he was forgiven.

"Hey," Harry said, dropping down beside him, "Sorry about that. You know how it can get."

Draco wordlessly leaned his head against Harry's shoulder, staring out at the crescent moon over the waves. Harry relaxed against him, saying Draco's name softly against his hair before pressing his face into it, inhaling the scent. *Mine,* the gesture almost seemed to say, and Draco loved the feeling of it.

Draco took Harry's hand and stroked it, fingers lingering over the gold rose ring he'd made Harry, and Harry said, in a breathless little whisper, "Do you think you might make yourself a ring like this someday?"

Draco felt a broad, astonished smile spread across his face. He peeled his face off Harry to regard him with a teasing glee. "Why, Harry. Are you asking me to marry you?"

"No!" Harry exclaimed quickly. "Not at all! Just- just wondering if maybe... maybe someday..."

"Someday," Draco agreed, and kept hold of Harry's hand, and together, they stared out at the waves.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone for following along with this journey with me! It's been a real labor of love. I've put a lot of myself into it. I can't believe it's done! This story really means a lot to me. I hope everyone has enjoyed :)

I really appreciate all your comments and encouragement! Thanks so much to everyone who's stuck with the story even through my breaks and followed along throughout! Thanks also to new readers discovering the story! I love all of you, and send so many hugs and thanks <3

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